FAILURE OF POLITICAL ISLAM IN TURKEY

Political Islam played an important role in the previous three decades of Turkish political life. It is now time to declare the failure of political Islam and its gradual disappearance from the Turkish political scene. The ruling party, Justice and Development, sealed the fate of political Islam after it appropriated a conservative-democrat identity. This essay deals with four key assumptions on the political Islam that may help us to understand why political Islam in Turkey is on the verge of disappearing.

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An important legacy of Ottoman patrimonial state tradition is the perception of politics as a negative phenomenon and belonging to the state realm (Mardin: 1973, 173). Politics from the people's side is something that is pursued against the state and problems with the state are unavoidable for those involved, up to the loss of life (*siyaseten katl*) (Sencer: 1974, 85-96). Although it has changed to a certain extent, the remnants of this understanding survive. The repressive state policies, in particular of the single party era, fed this understanding and accordingly Islamists searched for non-political sub-realms of the public sphere. This situation led to the emergence of an alternative religious public sphere, which consisted of the private sphere and available sub-realms of public sphere. For example, the Nur (light) Movement pursued their activities through private reading circles, printed media and even attempted to use state radio when conditions were suitable.

In the polarized political atmosphere in late 1960s, an Islamist party emerged as a legitimate actor and joined the coalition governments in following years. I will avoid summarizing the evolution of the "national view" (*milli görüş*) mission and the parties that have been established with the same ideology through time since this has been well done in several other studies (Çakır: 1994). The Turkish establishment adopted an attitude of social engineering that aimed to minimize the support and impact of these parties and even closed down several parties with different allegations. However, political Islam successfully reincarnated at each turn.

Originally, an Islamist party could not appeal to large constituencies and was not very successful until the 1990s. What is significant is its continuous increase in support that brought an Islamist party to senior coalition partner. For nearly a year, the leader of the Welfare Party was prime minister, exemplifying a democratic rise of an Islamist party to the government.

Before going into the details of the political Islam, it is necessary to discuss the overall position of Islam in the country and the rise of Islamic masses in different realms. The local context, which is under strong influences of globalization, should be taken into consideration, in addition to the position of the political Islam vis-à-vis local context. In this sense, the Turgut Özal era (1983-93) became a rapid opening period in cultural and economic spheres. This development was a direct influence of the globalization that created dynamic processes in social, cultural and economic realms. What Özal did was indeed to allow and facilitate the penetration of the forces of globalization into Turkey. The developments in cultural and economic realms forced to widen the legitimacy base in politics and extend the boundaries of business and economic activity in the country.

The burgeoning new print and broadcast media and communication tools led to the emergence of a new public sphere, which allowed alternative views to be presented. The multiplicity and difficulty of controlling the new communication tools served to emancipate captive dialogue. The most dynamic segments of Turkish society were Kurds and Islamists. Another ongoing process was the enlargement of economic accessibility. In the last decade, policies oriented towards greater liberalization and a shift to export-oriented industrialization have led to the emergence of new, dynamic export-oriented, industrialists on a small and medium scale, especially in traditionally conservative Anatolian cities. This new economic class was different than the already existing economic establishment in Turkey. As early as the 1920s, the strategy of creating a native bourgeoisie led to enormous economic growth on

the part of some industrialists, which were close to the founding fathers of the republic, thanks to special incentives and protectionist measures. Over the course of time, a link emerged between some segments of the state bureaucracy and big industrialists. The new industrialists, however, developed out of establishment venue and created an alternative economy widening the well-established boundaries and challenging the rationale of the Turkish economy.

These developments led to the emergence of Islamic tones in all walks of life and a siege of the political center by traditional peripheral elements, if we were to use Mardin's framework of the center-periphery relations in Turkey (Mardin: 1973, 175). The creation of alternative political and economic realms dominated the political and economic establishment with a visible potential to transform the status quo in many different respects. The Islamists joining of the economic and political spheres created a sort of incompatibility. However, it is an oversimplification to reduce all tensions to this incompatibility. A number of assumptions may help to escape from essentialist and reductionist interpretations of this tension and incompatibility and serve for a better understanding of political Islam within the Turkish political system.

Four Critical Assumptions on Political Islam in Turkey

First, the perception of political Islam as anti-modern, unauthentic and reactionary prevails among the secular elite in Turkey. The twin dilemma that political Islam is opposing modernity while ignoring the fact that it is also a product and internal part of modernity, has currency in secular circles. For example Kaya, after criticizing Göle, the well-known scholar of Islam in Turkey, for presupposing some authentic elements within the Islamist movement argued: "I insist that modernity does not permit cultural identities to be original or authentic and that Islamism itself is part of modernity rather than a questioning of modernity" (Kaya, 209). The problem here is degrading Islam as an essentialist category, which is resistant to the modernity in all walks of life. There is a vicious cycle here that anything with Islam will corrupt in the aftermath of its relations with Islam. For example Islam and politics or Islam and economy come together only when some people attempt to abuse Turkish people by exploiting Islam. Furthermore, political Islam in Turkey has been interpreted as a threat to the political and economic establishment. As Zürcher pointed out: "Opponents to the Kemalist vision of modernity throughout the seventy-five year history of the republic have been branded as supporters of *irtica* (religious reaction, or, in the contemporary context, "fundamentalism"), the very antithesis of everything the Kemalist modernization project stands for" (Zürcher 2000, 62).

The same perception was also the root cause of army's putting an end to the Erbakan government and closing the Welfare Party. This ousting and closure subsequently were the establishment's attempt to prevent the party's practice of *irtica* and its potential to undermine the secular order. Any challenge to the secular-modernist bases of the Turkish republic automatically alarms the regime's mental map of danger and leads to fierce reaction. Here the problem between political Islam and the state is the latter's narrowing the meaning of "contemporary" to "secular" (Zürcher 2000, 55-64). This cognition resulted in pathetic responses to the electoral victories of the Welfare Party and at the end secular elites have been hostage to the struggle to finish political Islam with all possible means. Meaningful in this respect, political Islam in Turkey has neither been universal as explained in theoretical sense nor national in Turkey's national-secular meaning. It leads to interpretation and understanding of political Islam as intact, unchangeable, non-adoptive and strict. On the

contrary, we witnessed a break in the strategies and thinking of political Islam in the aftermath of the neo-liberal encounter in Turkey, which paved way for a mass-appealing Islamist party. The transformation and change from state-centric strategies to horizontal and society centric targets can easily be discovered with the analyses of the party programs and political actions.

Second, the question of divine sovereignty versus popular sovereignty should be addressed in understanding political Islam in Turkey. In this sense *irtica* is the antithesis of secular-modernization and can dismember the Turkish nationhood project and put faith above loyalty to the state. This problem is also related to the very nature of the neo-liberal globalization that leads to the erosion of national sovereignty.[1] In theoretical meaning, divine sovereignty assumes a different perception of the social and political events and proposes different values, norms and principles.

In this problem of popular sovereignty, political Islam has no objection to the idea that political decisions must be in conformity with the divine law. As Bahlul argued, "endorsement of divine sovereignty by some Islamic thinkers may be viewed as an attempt to provide criteria for political rightness or validity which go beyond factual procedures that vest legitimacy in the hands of the people or their rulers" (Bahlul: 2000, 293). This situation implies two problems in this sense regarding the location of political Islam in Turkish politics. The first problem is political Islam's acceptance of political rightness as something beyond a mere counting of the votes. The other is the existence of epistemic standards that privilege some and carry them to the ruling position. These two problems, however, were not witnessed in the short governing period of the Welfare Party and in other municipal administrations. Although they did nothing to change popular sovereignty, insecure identity of the secular elite resulted in keeping suspicion about political Islamists' hidden agenda of adopting divine sovereignty. This problem has not been discussed much among the Islamic thinkers in Turkey. Ali Bulaç, prominent Islamic intellectual, underlines political Islam's increasing internalization of popular sovereignty and attempts to find a common ground that will reconcile popular and divine sovereignties.[2]

Third, political Islam in Turkey has a latent identity of nationalism and it is no surprise that the different parties established in the line of "national view" entered in coalition with secular-nationalist Republican Peoples Party in the 1970s and electoral coalition with the far-right Nationalist Action Party in 1991. It is not something new to say that national loyalties began to replace the mainstream loyalty to the Islamic community since late 19th century. As Keddie argued, the Pan-Islam movement played an important role in the transition from Islamic to the national loyalties. Keddie further pointed out, "Pan-Islam seems to have more resemblance to modern nationalist movements than to older Islamic feelings. Pan-Islam, like Asian and African nationalism, was primarily a reaction to Western imperialism" (Keddie: 1969, 18). The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and establishment of a nation-state based on an ethno-linguistic, territorial nationalism fostered the nationalist sentiments and made it an intrinsic part of the worldview of the different segments of Turkish people. In this vein, nation-state and its unique design of nation were perceived as indispensable social

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1 Ironically, political Islam preferred the title milli görüş (national view) for its program up until to the mid-1990s to the term milli with the same meaning that had been used in the formation phases of the Turkish republic. Their use of the term assumes the unity of different Islamic peoples in the country and adds a sacrosanct nature to the homeland on which these peoples live.

2 Personal Correspondence, 3 March 2002.

technologies for the future (*beka*) of Islamic societies (Bora: 1999, 105). On the other hand, the aggressive cultural defensiveness among Turkish Islamists, which glorify Ottoman past and its superiority over the European powers, created an additional local pride perpetuating the penetration of nationalism to their Islamist worldview.

Political Islam's interpretation and understanding of the Cyprus question, Armenian problem and Kurdish issue is not much different than the approaches at mainstream nationalist agenda. The Sevres-Syndrome that foreign powers are about to divide Turkey into parts (in association with their local agents) is prevalent among the elites of the Political Islam in Turkey. Almost the same nationalist sensitivities came to the agenda of the Islamists in an exaggerated or manipulated form. Political Islamists sanctify the territories or the issues at stake. For example, if it is Cyprus then they consider it as the Ottoman legacy and a sacred land that many martyrs died for. If the Armenian question is on the agenda then the problem is about the invasion of the inner shrine of Islam (*İslamın harim-i şerifi*) by Christian crusaders. The Kurdish question is a real litmus test for the political Islam in Turkey. The Welfare Party was the only mass party that underlined the necessity of different approaches to the Kurdish question. However, it abandoned its reform proposals on the issues of Kurdish demands of basic cultural rights and expressing their identities and left the ground to the dominance of military solution to the Kurdish problem in their short government term. The division of the political Islam into two parties, Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*) and Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) led to the speculation that the Kurdish issue would have top priority did not come true, and this is evident in their party programs.[3] The reformist wing in this movement expressed the sympathy toward publication and broadcast in Kurdish but follow the classic line of thought that advocates Islamic brotherhood to overcome "nationalist fantasies." The nationalization of Islam in Turkey has been a long process and it is not an easy to divorce this. Political Islam gives a nationalist and closed image while they are in administration. Although political Islam's main problem has been with the state elite (non-elected rulers of Turkey), it should also be questioned why Political Islam could not transcend this deadlock while having strong support and legitimate representation at the societal level. It is interesting to note that AKP was able to take initiative and challenge the status quo on the Cyprus question after emphasizing its departure from Islamic identity and appropriating of a new conservative-democratic identity.

The fourth assumption is political Islam's weakness in expressing its nativity to the people of Turkey (Koru: 1999). The leadership of the Welfare-Virtue Party line also pursued superficial relations with the Islamist intellectuals and lost their touch with the intellectual accumulation and expertise in the scientific platform. This is the case not only regarding the conventional Islamic issues but also in other areas of the sciences, i.e. economics. This line presents itself in well-organized references to just order *(adil düzen)* program. This program is allegedly a high level academic study of an alternative system of government. A recent survey indicated that a majority of Welfare Party supporters have no idea about its program of creating a just order but only imagine that the program assumes an egalitarian and justice based order (ARAŞ: 1994, 24-34).

Islamist intellectuals, on the other hand, did not hesitate to criticize political Islam's over-politicization of religious demands like building a mosque in Taksim, the veiling issue and for its U-turns when the pressures come from military. Another serious criticism is Welfare

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[3] Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi Parti Programı (Party Program of Justice and Development Party): http://www.akparti.com.tr.

Party's hegemonic attitudes to other political positions and narrowing the civil sphere, which would at the end serve to polarize and provoke the party and religious people in general. It is possible to increase the number of the criticisms like Welfare Party's silence over Susurluk crisis, a Watergate type scandal in Turkey. However, professor of law and influential academic Karaman's critique was more serious than others. He argued the party's use of *imam-hatip* schools is the non-ethical exploitation of religious people and the loss of what has been gained since the transition to democracy (Karaman: 1997).

The gap between the political Islam and Islamist intellectuals (and religious people) is apparent if one considers the slow transformation and change of orientation of the former in comparison to the dynamic nature of the latter. While political Islam is traveling in the narrow corridors of the problematic state-society relations and involving itself in binary fights like secularism versus Islam, the Islamist intellectuals deal with the issues of civilizations and are in search of a new paradigm. They have a more universal vision of Islam and project an alternative paradigm based on the whole knowledge and experiences of the Muslims all over the world. They are, in this sense, far ahead of the political Islamists in supporting democracy, human rights and rule of law in Turkey.

One additional point is the relationship of political Islam with other Islamic communities and its degree of inclusiveness and representation, giving a number of hints to understand the nativity problem. One fundamental question emerges out of the very problem of political Islam in Turkey in gathering votes from non-political Islamic communities such as Nurcus, Süleymancıs, Nakshis or Kadiris. These communities largely supported the center right parties with idea that they may better represent their interests. Nurcus supported Justice Party in 1970s, Motherland Party during the reign of Özal and True Path Party after 1995. On the other hand, there is no more single institutionalization of political Islam in Turkey and we have different parties such as Felicity Party, Justice and Development Party, and to a certain extent nationalist Great Unity Party. Due to this underlined dual polarization at the both sides of Islamists, the inconsistency rose between differing Islams and the claim of being a universal alternative project.

Conclusion

This essay offered a number of assumptions in order to facilitate a better understanding of political Islam in Turkey. The discussion over the question of authenticity, its relations with modernity, the characteristics of divine sovereignty and different loyalty patterns provides a comprehensive analysis regarding the failure of political Islam in Turkish political system. It is now a part of the past and followers of this movement are re-adapting themselves to the reality of the 21st century and associate themselves and the whole of Turkey with more and more democratic rules and principles.

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