



NEW GOVERNMENT:

PRO...WHAT? *

by *Hasan Engin Şener*

The AKP (Justice and Development Party) won a huge victory in Turkey's elections at the beginning of November. Now people are beginning to ask seriously what do they really believe in? On the 8th November, *Le Monde* was obviously non-plussed, its headline asked "Islamist, democrat or conservative - What is the AKP?". Such confusion is apparent in Turkish journals as well. Nobody, it seems, knows. The question is, what is in fact going on in the mind of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the banned leader of the AKP? What does he believe and how can people find out?

Yet it is impossible to answer these questions without reference to the history of "political Islam" in Turkey. One must understand that the AKP was born out of the Fazilet Party (Virtue Party) as was a more moderate party the Saadet Party (Happiness Party). The Virtue Party itself grew out of the ashes of the strongly pro-Islamist and illegal Refah Party (Welfare

Party). To understand the AKP we must first turn to the Refah Party.



The principle of secularism and forces against it

Since modern Turkey's foundation it has had, at its core the principle of a secular state leading to some of the more obscure rules in Turk society, such as the ban on headscarves and beards in the administration. However the forces of political Islam have for years fought against such ideologies.

When Refah became dominant party in the National Assembly in 1996, the same questions were asked of it as are being asked today of the AKP. Its ideology of "national view" (*voix nationale, milli görüş*) was considered a threat to the founding principles of Turkish Republic - such as the rule of law, the secularism etc. Time passed, and it failed to quell the fears. In response, the Turkish Constitutional Court declared that its activities were contrary to the principle of

* **The Sprout**, Number 4, December 2002, pp. 17-18.



secularism and shut it down. After the judgement, the leaders of Refah applied to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) claiming that this was a violation of article 11 of European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) which guarantees the freedom of assembly. Refah's leader at the time, Necmettin Erbakan, did this despite being very sceptical about the "European" institutions due to their "Christian" character. Erbakan was confident of a positive result, however, the case was found against Refah. The European Court decided that the Refah had "infringed the principle of secularism" due to it holding that the "plurality of legal system introducing discrimination on the grounds of belief", of "applying sharia to the Muslim community", and of "jihad (holy war) as a political method." Funnily enough after this decision Erbakan returned to his sceptic position over Europe.

So what was the main position of political Islam in Turkey as regard to Europe? There was a strong scepticism towards Europe stemming from the religious fear which asserts that the EU was "Christians' Club" and Turkey should reject it in order not to be assimilated by it. Ruşen Çakır's,

in his influential article, "*Process of Westernisation (sic.) of Islamist*" quotes Arif Emre's, one of Erbakan's the right-hand men, "In the event of our entrance to the European Community, it would need (...) a second conquest of Istanbul."



A New Dawn?

AK Party as the centre of pragmatism

Suppose that you have political power (but not especially military power) to spread your ideology, an ideology that is contrary to the very principles of the State. Would you really implement them explicitly, for instance, as Erbakan and Refah did? Would you really take a clear-cut negative position against national, and also international institutions? Can we believe that Erdoğan will be foolish enough to put into practice - if he really has not changed - a kind of fundamentalism? I contend that, if you are radically against the very principles of the State, and if you have no military power base, but political, you

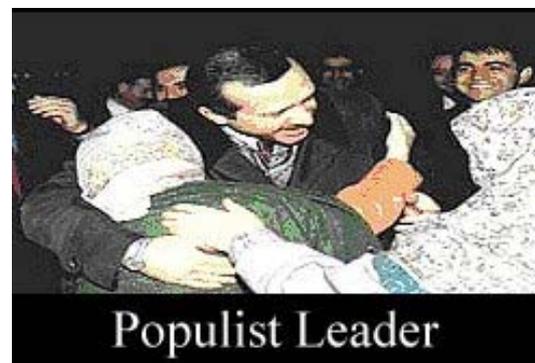


should be in conformity with the system as much as possible, to survive in the political arena.

It is quite clear that Erdoğan was as radical as Erbakan. Just read his radical Islamic poem: "The mosques are our barracks / the domes are our helmets / the minarets are our bayonets / and the faithful is our soldiers." We can find many other examples but I think that this shows that he was certainly Islamist. However, today his position is claimed to be Pro-European, pro-American, to sum up, *pro-Western*. Has he really changed? It is impossible to answer it explicitly, because we do not have x-ray specs to divine what is on his mind. But we can say one thing: Erdoğan is playing the game to an inch of the rules. Erdoğan if nothing else, is certainly a *pragmatist* leader.

Just after his election victory, he sent a message to Europe explaining his immediate agenda: "Our most urgent issue is the EU and I will send my colleagues to Europe without waiting to receive the mandate. We have no time to lose. We shall launch an immediate initiative for the EU."

Such a message had already been given to the US administration months ago. Interestingly, although Erdoğan was supporting the idea that "IMF cannot direct our economy", after his visit to the USA in 2001, he changed his mind and began to respect IMF to the so-called extent of "safeguarding national interests." His following words reveals the fact that they got the consent of the USA administration: "USA is the country who knows best that we are not pro-Islamist." The USA's positive reactions to the victory of AKP also confirm this assumption.



Advantages of being pro-Western for the AKP

With a pragmatist character the AKP could give rise to the implementation of more coherent policies *within* the system. This will be limited by pressure coming from the people who voted for Fazilet and Refah in the earlier elections. Immediately, there is only one topic that clashes with the



current political system, the infamous "headscarf" issue. According to the Turkish Constitutional Court, to support the idea of wearing headscarves in the public institutions and schools is a serious violation of the principles of secularism. A crucial point here is that though ECtHR states that everybody should obey the public institutions' and schools' regulations concerning clothes, ECtHR in its 2001 judgement underlined that supporting such a view would not necessarily be in contradiction with the principle of secularism as opposed to the interpretation of Turkish Constitutional Court.

So, while Erdoğan claims to support full European membership for Turkey to broaden rights and liberties, simultaneously, he may find legal basis for his, if any, pro-Islamist vision. Furthermore, the European Commission's 2002 Progress Report supplies another argument that having a pro-European vision would bring some advantages to Erdoğan and the Islamist movement in Turkey: "The Commission considers that the decision of the High Electoral Board to prevent the leader of a major political party from participating in the November 3 general elections does not reflect the spirit

of the reforms." So it's clearly stated by the Commission that Erdoğan's banned situation is not compatible with the "spirit of reforms" carried out by Turkey and with the democracy, so he may call on the EU for help in lifting the prohibition on him to be elected as a Prime Minister.

But we still do not know whether Erdoğan is still pro-Islamist. However what is clearer is that AKP is a *pragmatic pro-Western party* trying to play the game within the framework of democratic rules for reasons which Turks still do not know. Some worry that it is going to use EU rules to smash apart Turkey's secular constitution.