

# THE STATE OF POLITICAL ISLAM IN TURKEY

## COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS WITH PRE-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Introduction

While Turkey's Islamic oriented Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) was formally established in 1983,<sup>2</sup> its rise to prominence became

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<sup>1</sup>Whilst there exists numerous Islamic groups in Turkey ranging from Sufi sects to violent extremist groups such as Hizbullah which was founded in 1979, the year of the Iranian revolution, and which declares itself in favour of violent action and regards post-revolutionary Iran as its model (see for example, J. Gorvett, 'Hizbullah Horror-A National Shame', *The Middle East*, Issue No. 299, March 2000), our concern in this paper is the impact of political Islam within mainstream, multi-party participation.

<sup>2</sup>As an Islamic political organisation, it first emerged on the Turkish political scene in 1970 under the name of the National Order Party (MNP). It was closed down a year later by the Constitutional Court for violating Turkish laws forbidding the use of religion for political purposes. In 1972 with the same leadership and programme it reorganised under the name of The National Salvation Party (MSP). As the MSP, it participated in the 1973 and 1977 legislative elections gaining enough votes to allow it to participate in various coalition governments during that decade. The 1980 military coup resulted in the closure of the MSP as well as all other political parties. Hence

particularly evident during the 1994 municipal elections where it won the mayors office in twenty-eight cities including Istanbul and Ankara. The party became further -albeit temporarily- embedded on Turkey's political map when, during the December 1995 general elections, it captured a respectable twenty-one percent of the popular vote. A percentage which, for the first time in its history, made it the largest party in parliament and allowed it to put together a ruling coalition government in June 1996 after the previous government coalition was brought down on corruption charges.<sup>3</sup>

Turkey has its own unique complexities, and any attempt to come up with an overarching general explanation will inevitably lead to oversimplification. Describing Turkish politics as a battleground between secularism and fundamentalism and focusing on the looming threat of political Islam make good headlines, but a poor basis for analysis. Prior to the 1995 general elections for example, Tansu Çiller, the then Prime Minister and leader of the True Path Party, claimed that should the Refah Party win the forthcoming elections, Turkey was destined to become another Iran. This prospect, as the Prime Minister put it, would result in the fall of Turkey and 'if Turkey falls', she warned, Islamic 'fundamentalism will reach Europe'.<sup>4</sup>

Again, it was on the basis of similar perceptions that in June 1997, the military decided to oust the Islamic party from office. Indicative of this was the comments of Turkey's chief of military intelligence, General Fevzi Türkeri. The General, it seems, appeared to justify the military's position with regard to the Refah Party by claiming that the country was 'facing an extremely serious

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it was with the return of multi-party politics in 1983, that the party re-emerged under the new name of Refah. See B. Toprak, 'Civil Society in Turkey', in A. G. Norton (ed.), *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Vol. 2, Leiden, New York & Koln, E. J. Brill, 1996, pp. 110-111.

<sup>3</sup> 21% of the votes in the 1995 elections meant Refah gained 157 seats in the 550-seat parliament. The True Path and Motherland won 135 and 133 seats respectively, whilst the Democratic Left Party gained 76 seats and the Republican People's Party finished with 50 seats. See J. H. Meyer, 'Politics as Usual: Çiller, Refah and Susurluk: Turkey's Troubled Democracy', *Eastern European Quarterly*, Vol. 32 (4), January 1999.

<sup>4</sup> F. Coleman, 'Will Turkey become the next Iran?', *U.S. News and World Report*, Vol. 116, No. 22, 6 June 1994.

threat' because the Islamic movement was 'working closely with Iran...to pull Turkey into an endless darkness'.<sup>5</sup> The point here, and as these statements illustrate, is the assumption by Turkey's secular elite that an apparently mainstream Islamic party successfully participating within the formal political arena would most likely result in the transformation of the country along lines similar to that of post-revolutionary Iran. The focus of this paper is to question the viability of this logic. That is, to assess the degree to which the prevalence of political Islam in contemporary Turkey realistically renders its fate comparable to that of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

## 2. Turkey and Iran: Historical patterns in the relationship of *Din wa Dawla* (Religion and the State)

On surface, it would appear that both Turkey and Iran have shared characteristics, which might indeed encourage comparison. Apart from being the only non-Arab Muslim states in the Middle East, it can be argued that in the case of both nations, disparate external constraints were significant factors influencing the formation of the two republics. In both cases for example geopolitical constraints:

...arising from the regional context (the insidious conflict between Greece and Turkey; the Iran-Iraq war), the long East-West confrontation, in which Central Asia was one of the major frontiers...the collapse of the Soviet Union and the war in Kuwait....nurtured a specific republican imaginary...Above all, they opened the door to the intervention of outside actors who had no hesitation in influencing the trajectory of these republics by means of war, the secret services, terrorism or aid.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover the manner in which disparate external constraints played a role in the shaping of both republics:

...seems less important than that of internal dynamics. This is obvious in the case of Iran, where the setting up of the Islamic Republic was a double rejection of external constraints: American influence, and

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<sup>5</sup>Quoted from *International Herald Tribune*, 10 June 1997 by Meyer, *Politics as Usual*.

<sup>6</sup>J-F. Bayart, 'Republican Trajectories in Iran and Turkey', in G. Salamé (ed.), *Democracy Without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World*, London and New York, I. B. Tauris, 1994, p. 284

structural adjustment of a retier economy carried away by the fever of petrodollars.... in Turkey too the republic was born of nationalist struggle against foreign tutelage...<sup>7</sup>

The fact that internal dynamics led to the disparate paths of a nationalist struggle in the case of Turkey and later, an Islamic Revolution in the case of Iran, is in itself an indication of the distinctiveness of both nations. On this basis, if one turns to the early part of the twentieth century, it is perhaps not too surprising therefore to find that even though Turkey and Iran both experienced modernizing authoritarian regimes, these regimes differed extensively once one passed 'the outward appearance of certain reforms undertaken by Mustafa Kemal and Reza Shah'.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed it can be noted that Reza Shah's modernisation drive included efforts at industrialisation, expansion of the educational system, the upgrading and expanding the transportation system (including the construction of Irans first railway system, Trans-Iranian Railway), the establishment of a National Bank and the transformation of the bureaucracy from a haphazard collection of hereditary scribes -some without fixed offices- into ten full-fledged ministries employing over 90,000 civil servants.<sup>9</sup> It can also be noted that under Reza Shah, the creation of Iran's first modern army allowed central government 'for the first time in living history...the military means to impose its will on the provinces'.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the drive for secularisation meant amongst other things, the Ministry of Justice substituting traditional clerical courts with a modern judicial system based on European jurisprudence.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, the modernising reforms of Reza Shah did not on surface, differ significantly from the reforms adopted by Atatürk in his attempt to modernise Turkey. Yet whereas Reza Shah's modernisation reforms strengthened the state in terms of providing it with new instruments of coercion and administration, the state nevertheless remained weak since it failed to link its new institutions to the social structure of the country. In

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 285.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>9</sup>W. A. Joseph, M. Kesselman and J. Krieger (eds.), *Third World Politics at the Crossroads*, Lexington, MA, D. C. Heath and Company, 1996, p. 354.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 355.

other words, the new 'Pahlavi state -like the Safavids and Qajars- hovered over, rather than embedding itself into, the society'.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, the modernisation reforms implemented by Atatürk following the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, as one author explains:

...extended far beyond the modernisation of the state apparatus and the transition from a multiethnic Ottoman Empire to a secular republican nation-state in their attempts to penetrate into the lifestyle, manners, behaviour and daily customs of the people, and to change the self-conceptions of Turks.<sup>13</sup>

Extending beyond the modernisation of the state apparatus for Atatürk meant amongst other things, the implementation of major reforms within the administrative, educational and legal systems including 'the *medreses* and other schools giving religious education [being] closed in 1924 and the *Shari'a* (Islamic Law), along with religious courts [being] abolished in 1926'.<sup>14</sup> Symbolic reforms that centred on the Latinization of the Turkish alphabet, 'outlawing the fez, condemning the veil',<sup>15</sup> and the banning of 'Qur'an readings over the state-owned radio'<sup>16</sup> were also amongst Atatürk's modernisation drive. Atatürk, it seems, felt 'that the transformation of Turkey from an Islamic state into a secular republic was essential to the process of modernisation'.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, Islam, it was thought, 'stood in the way of change'.<sup>18</sup> In this respect, it was not surprising that Atatürk firmly held the view that 'authority should not...rest on its connection to religious faith'.<sup>19</sup> This meant 'The Caliphate and the Shariah, or Muslim

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>N. Göle, 'Authoritarian Secularism and Islamist Politics: The Case of Turkey', in Norton, *Civil Society in the Middle East*, p. 21.

<sup>14</sup>Toprak, *Civil Society in Turkey*, p. 107.

<sup>15</sup>J. A. Bill and R. Springborg, *Politics in the Middle East*, 4th edition, New York, Harper Colins, 1994, p. 183.

<sup>16</sup>Toprak, *Civil Society in Turkey*, p. 107.

<sup>17</sup>B. Lombardi, 'Turkey-the Return of the Reluctant Generals?', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 112 (2), Summer 1997, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup>M. Heper and M. Ciner, 'Parliamentary Government with a Strong President: The Post-1989 Turkish Experience', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 111 (3), Fall 1996, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup>Lombardi, *Turkey-the Return of the Reluctant Generals?*, p. 2.

holy law, was therefore abolished; education in public schools was to be strictly secular and focused on pre-Islamic (pre-Ottoman) Turkish past'.<sup>20</sup>

Atatürk's modernisation efforts and the lack of organised opposition from religious groups was largely linked to his ability to preserve the intertwined relationship of *Din wa Dawla* (religion and the state) inherited from the Ottomans. In other words, Atatürk 'definitively subordinated the one to the other by the way of the Office of Religious Affairs...In this way he took up the old scheme of the sultans, always anxious to make the *ulama* subject to them'.<sup>21</sup> The overall difference between Islam under the Ottomans and Qajar Iran in this respect is that, as Zubaida points out:

The specific character of modern Iranian Shiism is not to be sought in some inherent essence of Shiism in general, but in the recent history of Iranian society and state. The key element, I would argue, is the mode of institutionalisation of religion in relation to the state. Whereas in the Ottoman world....religion was firmly attached to the state, in Qajar Iran [1796-1926] religion...was autonomously instituted.<sup>22</sup>

Hence, whereas Atatürk inherited and was able to maintain from the Ottomans a process whereby *Din wa Dawla* were not separate but intertwined entities in which the state maintained domination, Reza Shah inherited from the Qajars a situation whereby religious 'magnates formed part of the local power structures [and] *Mujtahids* (clerics of high rank) were often wealthy landlords in their own right, as well as controlling revenues from religious endowments (*waqfs*)'.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the influence of the clergy and the religious classes as a whole in early twentieth century Iran can be detected in the fact that the fall of the Qajar dynasty and the subsequent rise of Reza Khan and his Pahlavi dynasty was to some degree linked to their support. As Baktiari points out: 'Reza Khan seemed to have been following the events in Turkey ... His aim was to find some

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Bayart, *Republican Trajectories in Iran and Turkey*, p. 288.

<sup>22</sup>S. Zubaida, *Islam, The People and The State*, London, New York, I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1993, p. 56.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

way of expelling the old dynasty. He had to be wary. To destroy deep-seated loyalties was not without risks. So he began to cultivate the religious classes'.<sup>24</sup> What this means therefore is that whilst the nature of Islamic institutionalisation under the Ottoman Empire continued under Atatürk and allowed him to adopt modernisation programmes unfettered by the constraints of an autonomous religious constituency, this was more difficult for his counter-part in Iran during that same period.

### 3. Contrasting Nature of Political Islam

It is well documented that the influence of an autonomous and cohesive religious class in Iran and its significance in Iranian politics were to eventually play a crucial role in the downfall of the Pahlavi dynasty.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth noting here that the formation of an Islamic republic and the role of the clergy in its eventual establishment in Iran appears to have been enhanced as a consequence of growing opposition to modernisation programmes in general and secular policies in particular. The clergy, in other words, began to move under the rule of Mohammed Reza Shah, from a 'quietist phase' in the 1950s to 'rebellious' and later 'revolutionary' phases in the 1960s and 1970s because:

...secularism in general, and the erosion of the Islamic content of family and personal as well as property laws in particular, remained focal points of resistance. In the content of discourse secularism was defined as the paramount expression of dependent capitalism and imperialist penetration into the country...Secularism was associated with ever-increasing state control and the failures of the state were explained in terms of the failure of modernist anti-religious policies.<sup>26</sup>

The fact that the Iranian clergy were in a position to express their discontents and move through these phases is not simply indicative of their autonomy as a religious group from the state,

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<sup>24</sup>B. Bakhtiari, *Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran: The Institutionalisation of Factional Politics*, Florida, University of Florida Press, 1996, p. 23.

<sup>25</sup>For example see M. M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution*, London, Harvard University Press, 1980.

<sup>26</sup>H. Omid, 'Theocracy of Democracy? The Critics of "Westofication" and the Politics of Fundamentalism', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.12 (4), 1992.

but equally important, it is a reflection of the popular support that was becoming increasingly evident as a consequence of such autonomy. Put simply, the flagrant corruption and increasing mismanagement of state resources under Mohammed Reza Shah meant that: '... the clergy was able to challenge the government and benefit from public support because of its distance from politics, which gave its members an aura of cleanliness and incorruptibility'.<sup>27</sup>

The rise of mainstream political Islam in Turkey on the other hand, and in particular 'Refah (under successive names and incarnations) has benefited for more than 20 years from the discreet support and complicity of a number of ostensibly secular forces'.<sup>28</sup> Indicative of this is that: 'In the early days, the party was courted by rightist formations anxious to please their conservative and Islamic electorate [and as a consequence] Necmettin Erbakan, the head of Refah, represented the Islamic movements as deputy prime minister in three government coalitions in the 1970s'.<sup>29</sup> What this indicates therefore is that whereas the popular support, and ultimately political power, gained by the Iranian clergy was linked to their distance from the then prevailing political system, Refah's rise to prominence was invariably linked to its integration within Turkey's existing political structure.

It is also worth noting that in pre-revolutionary Iran, the clergy attracted adherents representing diverse elements within the Iranian social order on the basis that all were united in their 'profound sense of moral outrage at the ancient regime, blaming it for squandering the country's wealth and for favouring the rich over the poor'.<sup>30</sup> Refah's bone of contention, on the other hand, did not appear to have been aimed directly at the Turkish political system but rather, at certain ideological aspects such as the concept of nationalism and interpretations of modernity. To Refah: 'Islam unites, while nationalism divides...[because] the umma (community

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<sup>27</sup>S. T. Hunter, 'Is Iranian Perestroika Possible Without Fundamental Change?', *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 21 (4), Autumn 1998, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup>E. Rouleau, 'Turkey: Beyond Atatürk', *Foreign Policy*, No. 103, Summer 1996, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup>F. Kazemi, 'Civil Society and Iranian Politics' in Norton, *Civil Society in the Middle East*, p. 122.



of believers) makes no distinction between its children, whatever their ethnic or linguistic background'.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, according to the party's 'Just Order',<sup>32</sup> modernity in terms of Atatürk's legacy of Western imitation proved beneficial only to the West. The argument, similar to classical dependency theory, being that it allowed the West to develop 'by under-developing the Islamic world in general and Turkey in particular'. However, whilst it goes on to declare that there is no 'enmity towards the West', it is, according to one party official, 'both logical and reasonable' that 'the same as the West unites to serve its interests, the Islamic nation should unite for its own good'.<sup>33</sup>

For such rhetoric, Refah nevertheless publicly refuted its portrayal by rivals as a party against democracy willing to suppress freedom when in power and that it is a party of 'traditional religious fanatics', which would use its power to 'initiate an Iranian-type regime'.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Refah's integration into Turkey's political arena appears to have been linked its apparently moderate political views. Most notable of which have been its support for a market economy 'albeit tempered by a socially minded statist paternalism'; its encouragement of civil society as reflected through the various professional associations it helped to create; and most importantly, 'its respect for republican principles and the legal system (notably, its program does not call for introducing the Sharia as the country's constitution)'.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, whilst Islam did indeed provide 'the overall theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the RP's platform and agendas', it is worth noting that the Just Order or Refah's 'other ideological expositions' never 'specifically' referred to religion. Rather, as one author notes:

The Refah's popular image as an 'Islamic party' was clue more to the history, activities and enunciation of its main activists -chief among

<sup>31</sup>Rouleau, *Turkey: Beyond Atatürk*, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup>The 'Just Order' constitutes an amalgamation of 31 articles published by Erbakan in 1991 in which mainly economic, but also socio-cultural, and theoretical issues are discussed within an ideological context. For summary of the 'Just Order', see M. Kamrava, 'Pseudo-democratic Politics and Populist Possibilities: The Rise and Demise of Turkey's Refah Party', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25 (2), November 1998, pp. 12-13.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., pp. 13-14.

<sup>34</sup>Göle, *Authoritarian Secularism and Islamist Politics*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>35</sup>Rouleau, *Turkey: Beyond Atatürk*, pp. 5-6.

whom is Erbakan- rather than its adherence to the theoretical works of a synthesiser of Islam and politics (like Iran's Ali Shariati).<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, as the same author goes on to point out: 'For the Refah's members and its supporters, Islam was not so much a guide for the acquisition and conduct of political power as it was a comforting source of identity and a larger, more general philosophical framework in which to operate'. As such, Refah's electoral success, was less a result of an Islamic upsurge within Turkish society and more as a result of disenchanting voters, 'troubled by Turkey's many, contradictory identities -Turk, European, Middle Eastern, secular, Muslim', and as a consequence, deciding 'to adopt a loosely Islamic identity'.<sup>37</sup> In this respect, unlike pre-revolutionary Iran, political Islam in Turkey has been channelled largely through the legitimate electoral participation of a political party not a religious class or institution. As one senior Refah politician exclaimed: 'even though citizens ask us religious questions, we do not give out Islamic religious opinion, because we are a political, not religious, institution'.<sup>38</sup>

In this respect, Refah's appeal cannot realistically be viewed as a consequence of an overwhelming rejection of Turkey's prevailing political system, as was the case of pre-revolutionary Iran. Rather, its electoral successes in the 1990s can be linked to a number of factors, which in theory are not alien to actors in any functioning multi-party system. Such factors include, but are not limited to: (i) its appeal to minorities (namely the Kurds whom under the 'Islamic' Ottomans felt less alienated than under Atatürk's legacy of Turkish nationalism); (ii) its appeal to those on the lower scale of the social strata (capitalising on Turkey's poor economic achievements which saw inflation rise by 150% in 1995, Refah's attempt to attract Turkey's underprivileged classes included proposals for an alternative order that aims at ensuring integrity, inspired honesty, and induced frugal behaviour<sup>39</sup>); and (iii) voter disenchantment of competing parties (namely the four main contenders: the True Path Party-DYP, the Motherland Party-ANAP, the Democratic Left Party-DSP and the Republican People's Party-

<sup>36</sup>Kamrava, *Pseudo-democratic Politics and Populist Possibilities*, p. 15.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>38</sup>Göle, *Authoritarian Secularism and Islamist Politics*, p. 41.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 33.

CHP were eroding public confidence not only as a result of corruption and favouritism scandals tarnishing the credibility of certain senior party members, but equally damaging was 'the rotation of the same group of politicians in and out of office, frequently changing party allegiances or forming their own parties', the consequence of which was interpreted by the public 'as a game through which politicians pursue vanity and self-aggrandisement rather than the nation's best interests'.<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Guarding National Interest

In assessing the degree to which the rise of political Islam in contemporary Turkey realistically renders its fate comparable to that of post-revolutionary Iran, another important aspect that cannot be overlooked is the role of the military. One of the characteristics of Middle Eastern politics has, and continues to be, the role of the military as the ultimate source of protection for authoritarian rulers and their particular brand of politics. In return for upholding their regime, it is not uncommon for Middle Eastern leaders to channel a disproportionate amount of state resources into developing and co-opting its military even at the expense of the nation's socio-economic development. As mentioned previously, this was the case in Iran under Reza Shah who constructed the nation's first modern army and later, his son, who continued throughout his rule to divert enormous state funding into it. As a consequence, with the growing tide of opposition, it was not until late December 1978 that Mohammed Reza Shah publicly stated his intention of leaving Iran. The deciding factor was when earlier that same month he began witnessing his army stand aside and do 'nothing to prevent enormous opposition marches and rallies, [on top of which] soldiers began massive desertions and mutinies, turning against officers rather than firing on demonstrators'.<sup>41</sup> In this respect, Mohammed Reza Shah felt he had lost the army to his opponents and, as such, he had lost his power, thus his decision to leave the country.

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<sup>40</sup>Kamrava, *Pseudo-democratic Politics and Populist Possibilities*, p. 10.

<sup>41</sup>D. E. Long and B. Reich (eds.), *The Government and Politics of The Middle East and North Africa*, 3rd ed., Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford, Westview Press, 1995, p. 50.

The role of the military in contemporary Turkey, however, has persisted to be an exception to this rule. Put simply, in contrast to most military establishments in the Middle East who tend to support and protect a particular leader or party in power, an important and rigorously maintained aspect of Atatürk's legacy continues to be the military's role as the ultimate protector of national interest. As one author explains:

That military leaders have sought to avoid any measures of association with partisan politics fits well with the institution's image of its own place in Turkish society. Enjoying broad public support, the armed forces have nothing to gain by becoming involved, except in the most exceptional situations, with the questionable antics of daily political life. The claim to being the custodians of national legitimacy could not be upheld were they to play an active political role.<sup>42</sup>

Reflective the military's independent and pro-secular position in Turkey were Refah's attempts to placate the army through various strategies, including the invitation of 'a number of prominent and respected retired and active-duty army officers to run as its candidates'.<sup>43</sup> Yet, as the same author pointed out, 'secularism appears to be too deeply ingrained in the culture of the Turkish military, especially among its ranking officers, for the Refah to have been able to easily endear itself to the men in uniform'.<sup>44</sup> The degree to which such perceptions are upheld by the Turkish military is reflected for example in its response in 1997 to a political rally held in the city of Sincan, in which the Iranian ambassador, as a guest speaker, called for the re-imposition in Turkey, of the *Shari'a*. The next morning, not content with diverting 'a column of tanks through the core of that city', the military moved to ensure the arrest of Sincan's Refah mayor and the subsequent expulsion of the Iranian Ambassador.<sup>45</sup>

In view of the unique and long-standing position of the Turkish military, the rise of a party to power, whether an Islamic inspired one such as Refah or indeed many of the secular ones

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<sup>42</sup>Lombardi, *Turkey-the Return of the Reluctant Generals?*, p. 16.

<sup>43</sup>Indeed, it succeeded in securing three former generals and four colonels on its electoral list. See Kamrava, *Pseudo-democratic Politics and Populist Possibilities*, p. 16.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Lombardi, *Turkey-the Return of the Reluctant Generals?*, p. 20.

within the Turkish political spectre, should at best be viewed as change of government not a change of regime. Indeed, the July 1993 incident in the town of Sivas<sup>46</sup> may be an indication that some elements of Refah's constituency is, as one author notes, not necessarily, immune to 'Islamic fascism'.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, it would be difficult to claim that approval of such extremist actions was widespread or would indeed be tolerated by the majority of people let alone the army. As General Evren, leader of Turkey's 1980 coup pointed out in an interview:

If a danger should threaten to alter completely the Republic and its character, our reaction will be legitimate. In such a case, one abandons the principle of keeping the army out of politics. If a system based on the *Shari'a* is advanced, even by democratic means, the Turkish armed forces would know not to remain spectators.<sup>48</sup>

Certainly, it is not unknown for the Turkish military to intervene in politics as it demonstrated most poignantly in 1960, 1971 and 1980.<sup>49</sup> In fact, in the case of Refah, the military did by early 1997 start what might be regarded as explicit intervention. Through this move -largely various conferences held by the National Security Council (MGK)- it demanded that Refah, and in particular, its leader Necmettin Erbakan abate the 'tide of radical Islam'.<sup>50</sup> The military's manoeuvres and warnings eventually brought about Erbakan's resignation in July that same year and led the country's attorney general (an independent non-political post in Turkey) to ask the constitutional court to initiate proceedings for the closure of Refah. Based on the argument that Refah 'stood in violation of the Turkish constitutions dedication to

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<sup>46</sup>In this incident, 37 people, many of whom were Alawite poets, intellectuals and musicians were burnt to death in their hotel during a festival intended to honour a popular Alawite poet, Pir Sultan Abdal. The reason of this attack being the presence of Aziz Nesin, an atheist intellectual who was planning to translate Salam Rushdie's 'Satanic Verses' into Turkish. Nesin did not perish in the attack, but the fact that the Refah mayor tried to prevent the festival, along with the fact that those responsible for the fire were never found and brought to justice pointed at the possibility of extremist factions within Refah's constituency. Göle, *Authoritarian Secularism and Islamist Politics*, p. 35.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Quoted in Lombardi, *Turkey-the Return of the Reluctant Generals?*, p. 20.

<sup>49</sup>For a brief examination of each of these interventions see *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

secularism',<sup>51</sup> the country's constitutional court ruled on 16 January 1998 for the closure of the party, banning Erbakan from active participation in politics for five years. What is interesting however, is the manner in which the Turkish judiciary appears to maintain political perceptions not dissimilar to that of the military. Reflective of this, is that the argument presented in court -and accepted by the judiciary- favouring the closure of Refah was based on the view: 'that the party is uncommitted to the basic tenets of the republic and that it is undemocratic', yet it is noted that Erbakan and his party, did not in fact break 'any particular law, nor were they tried for having done so. Rather it was ruled that Refah as a party had no place in Turkey'.<sup>52</sup>

### 5. Concluding remarks

It should be taken into account that the rise of Refah within the Turkish political arena and in particular its victory in the 1995 general elections was not one of a majority win on the legislative level. In fact, had the party been allowed to continue functioning, it is noted that 'secularist forces are too strong for Refah to have won a majority in a new general election'.<sup>53</sup> Such secularist forces, it would appear, exist not simply on the elite level, but more importantly on the grassroots level, as reflected not only by the Islamists apparent and potential inability to gain majority votes in legislative elections, but also by popular support for state intervention. As one Turkish shop manager argued to a journalist: 'People are uneducated' and hence 'we need protection against [the tide of political Islam]'.<sup>54</sup> In this respect, the apparent absence of overt popular concern at Refah's subsequent closure and, more recently, at the sentencing in March 2000 of its former leader, Erbakan, to a year in prison and the possibility of a life ban from political activity as punishment for a speech made in 1994, where he referred to Turkey's pro-secular parliamentarians as '*gavur*' or 'infidels' indicates political Islam in contemporary Turkey is hardly

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<sup>51</sup>Meyer, *Politics as Usual*, p. 8.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Lombardi, *Turkey-the Return of the Reluctant Generals?*, p. 20.

<sup>54</sup>R. Boulton, 'Turks Seek to Win Father States Conditional Trust', *Middle East Times*, Egypt Edition, 16-22 March 2000.

the revolutionary force it is portrayed to be.<sup>55</sup> More recently, the move by Turkey's chief prosecutor to file for a ban on Refah's successor, the pro-Islamist Virtue Party (FP), arguing that political Islamists are 'vampires roaming the land, gorging on ignorance', and hence 'people who say "no" to terrorism and political Islam...do the greatest service to democracy',<sup>56</sup> appears as a rather exaggerated statement, but nevertheless constitutes further indication that the guardians of Atatürk's legacy remain sufficiently zealous as to ensure Islamist waters do not run deep enough to create a legitimate threat to Turkey's existing political order.

In this respect what we seem to be witnessing in contemporary Turkey is a recurring pattern whereby the country's 'constitutional court closes parties, then allows their clones to reopen, just as its military overthrows its leaders, then allows them to return'.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, while Turkey may not be as democratic as the West, it remains 'decidedly much more democratic than its neighbours to the East'.<sup>58</sup> As such, it would be difficult to argue that the participation of an Islamic-oriented party in the formal political arena could realistically render the fate of Turkey comparable to that of contemporary Iran whereby a historically independent religious class found itself emerging as 'the product of political struggles under conditions generated by an autocratic and repressive state, which eliminated organised political forces of opposition' and as a consequence gave 'religious-clerical institutions and networks a considerable advantage over their rivals under conditions which favoured revolutionary transformations'.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>See D. O'Byrne, 'Turkeys Islamists Bargain for Hidden Leader', *Middle East Times*, Egypt Edition, 16-22 March 2000.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Meyer, *Politics as Usual*, p. 11.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State*, p. 180.