

# Identity Crises and Political Instability in Turkey

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*“Political changes need to be publicly negotiated, not imposed on society. Only a national consensus based on a new social contract—not force—can take the country beyond its self-generated conflicts, isolation and authoritarianism.”*

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The first military coup of the Republican regime that took place in May 1960 marked a series of military interventions that exposed the failure of Turkey's hegemonic political system to satisfy the majority of its citizens. Many Turks felt alienated from the Western-oriented, secular regime that, ironically, ignored Western values of legality and freedom and was unable to deliver the material wealth promised by modernization and economic development. The benefits of democracy, rule of law and secularism became less convincing as the quality and integrity of the regime that had defined and enshrined these national principles declined. Moreover, with historical identities diluted and modern ones not yet crystallized, identity crises in both traditional and modern sectors were inevitable.

In addition, the political elite has been unable to meet the needs and expectations of the nation whose hopes they have raised. Equality, respect or dignity, freedom, welfare, opportunities to improve social standing through education and an available job market remain on the whole unkept promises. People continue to face oppression, rampant inequality, unveiled corruption, prevailing poverty and ignorance.

The crisis of identity experienced by Turkey's citizens parallels the crisis of Turkey's hegemonic state. Understanding the roots of Turkey's identity crisis helps explain the problems confronted

by the hegemonic state, and the ensuing political instability. This article thus first introduces the concept of identity theory, and then uses this theory to examine Turkey's current and historical political events. The final section of the article builds upon this knowledge and analyzes contemporary problems caused by this identity conflict.

## GENERAL IDENTITY AND POLITICAL THEORY

### *The Hegemonic Model*

No culture or identity is resistant to change. Identities are primarily formed when groups of individuals in a society develop a dialectical relationship between "us" and "them." This dialectical relationship is an objective historical one and embodies a changing social construct. Multiple identities emerge out of contact between individuals and groups and, as these contacts proliferate and accumulate, cultures and identities change and new historical epochs are marked.

Individuals have several levels of identity. For example, a resident of Istanbul might be a descendant of the Byzantine Empire, an ethnic Greek or Armenian whose family lived through centuries of Ottoman rule and is now a citizen of the Republic of Turkey. He or she may be Christian or Muslim or Western-oriented, with aspirations to be a member of the European Union rather than a member of a Middle Eastern polity.

While multiple identities are a normal historical and social phenomenon, authoritarian politics oppose a pluralist understanding of social reality. In hegemonic polities, where the state apparatus controls all spheres of life, the "normal" interaction of social groups, ideas, opinions and cultures is forbidden.<sup>1</sup> This political engineering obliterates or obfuscates socio-cultural differences and has been used by many states in the early phases of nation-building. However, when such political manipulation continues in the later stages of governance, it has a dramatic impact on society. It creates a fixed, national identity, which the state attempts to protect from outside influences.

This theory of governance stems from the Jacobin tradition of the French Revolution and is also inherent in a corporatist system, where the state indirectly or directly maintains control over the

<sup>1</sup> Frank Louis Rusciano, *World Opinion and Emerging International Order* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996) p. 64.

social sphere and tries to shape society in concentric circles around the state. A corporatist regime is hegemonic, but also has an elaborate social design. For example, antagonism is not allowed between social classes and it is believed that there is no need for civil society or labor and professional organizations. The state dominates political, social, economic and cultural spheres and institutions and also prevents institutions and social relationships from developing autonomously.

Such Jacobin policies result in the dwarfing of civil society and everything associated with it, including religion. In many cases, religion and other aspects of the social realm are controlled by the state. This grip weakens only in the face of modernization and widening political participation. Religion and politics are not separated and, hence, the administration of religious affairs becomes a task of the state, and inevitably a political function. The corporatist structure is therefore unable to launch the process of secularization. So instead of placing the sacred in the social domain, thus making faith a matter of personal preference and a civil societal preoccupation, the state is made sacred.

The corporatist structure also means that the state controls all political activity. When politics and the state are perceived as synonymous, the political order loses its role as a mediator between the state and civil society. Touraine warns about the danger of confusing the institutional domains:

If we are to create democracy, we must... make a distinction between state political society, and civil society. If we confuse the state with political society, we will soon subordinate the multiplicity of social interests to the unifying action of the state. Conversely, if we confuse political society and civil society, it is no longer possible to see how we can create a political and juridical order that is not a mere reproduction of the dominant economic interests. The confusion of the two realms also might leave to the state sole responsibility for ensuring that society is managed coherently. In both cases, there is no space left for democracy. Democracy concerns political society, but it is defined by both the latter's autonomy and its own role as a mediator between the state and civil society. A direct and unmediated confrontation between the state and civil society might lead to the victory of one over the other but never to the victory of democracy.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Alain Touraine, *What is Democracy?*, trans. David Macey (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997) p. 41.

This analysis sheds light on the historical experience of many post-colonial societies that emerged after the collapse of cosmopolitan empires. The state's unchallenged and unmediated role during the nation-building process and afterward has led to an elitist definition of nation and citizenry. In many ways, the communication between civil society and state institutions that democracy requires remains fundamentally uni-dimensional, flowing only from the state to society. Because of this, the formation and expression of different opinions are suppressed.

As modernization advances, this tightly tailored "nation keeping" (the making and taming of the nation) scheme is doomed to failure, and a range of conflicts, generated internally and externally, arise as the political order begins to destabilize. This process leads to repression at home, causing new rifts between society and state and between the country and the international order, due to the regime's unsatisfactory civil rights record.

The hegemonic model requires tight control of education, the media and legal and political processes. The state's tight grip on society is legitimized by rallying people around the nation-state. Nationalism is the ideology used by the new governing elites. Because they need to consolidate states first and shape nations later, I call this approach the 'state-nation model' rather than the nation-state model.

#### *Effects of the Hegemonic Model on National Identity*

In multi-ethnic, multi-cultural societies, the definition of nationhood and citizenship may be based on the ethnicity, religion and cultural identity of one of the national groups, most often the majority group. In spite of the dominant group's claim that citizenship is only political, not ethnic, other ethnic or religious groups typically feel excluded and marginalized as they are suppressed in the name of national unity. Such a policy sows the seeds of conflict, which is further aggravated by economic disparity and the absence of free and pluralist political expression.

Social science suggests that individual and national identities are defined by their relationships with other individuals and nations.<sup>3</sup> National identity must be accepted by the individuals

<sup>3</sup> Carol Gillian, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) p. 160.

and social-cultural groups in that nation and this can only happen if they feel included, equal, empowered and motivated by the nation.<sup>4</sup> Inclusion and motivation can be spurred by education based on a common language and culture, by political participation or by enjoying the benefits of economic growth.

When national identity is not a construct negotiated by the citizens of that nation, it creates problems for neglected and excluded groups that can escalate into perceived security threats by the hyper-sensitive state. Exaggerated security consciousness can often lead to authoritarian policies that prevent the system from becoming fully democratic and pluralistic.

In addition to the problems security threats pose, the hegemonic state also faces challenges to their legitimacy. In hegemonic polities, elites tend to govern the state. Elite decisions regarding social welfare and governance have often been incorrect, creating bitterness and discontent. Also, as the majority of new nation-states were born out of the debris of colonial empires and traditional social formations, the new ruling elite tends to be anti-imperialist and anti-traditionalist, because they have seen both systems inhibit development. As religion lies at the core of tradition, it is no coincidence that the new nationalist elite tends to be determinedly secularist. The secular approach attempts to cut society's attachment to tradition at its most vital point: religion.

However, tradition can only be left behind once universal suffrage, education and industrialization have been attained. The new nation-states, some of which were born between the two World Wars and most of which were formed after the Second World War, did not experience the Enlightenment, Reform and Renaissance periods that Europe did but leapt directly into the modernization process. Hence, many of their traditions, which are incompatible with the tenets of modernity, are still intact.

#### *Religious Opposition to the Hegemonic State*

The third threat to the hegemonic state is religious opposition. Despite the modern and secular nature of the ruling elite in many new nation-states, their failure to grant their citizens the full benefits of economic development has brought them face to face

<sup>4</sup> Eric Waddel, "Language, Community and National Identity: Some Reflections on French-English Relations in Canada" in Alain G. Gagnon and J.P. Bickerton, eds., *Canadian Politics: An Introduction to the Discipline*, (Lewinston, ME: Broadview Press, 1990) p. 61.

with strong traditional opposition that is expressed in religious terms. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the Islamic world. Political Islam has become very problematic for secular, nationalist authoritarian regimes, especially recently. The rhetoric of religious movements refuses to recognize the autonomy of politics and instead attempts to put the state under the control of religion. Such religious movements are as totalitarian as their hegemonic secularist counterparts and leave no room for cultural, intellectual or ideological differences. This holistic perception of society as an undifferentiated entity where differences are either disregarded or eliminated creates an inability to tolerate dissent that always haunts the regime. This 'holistic logic' replaces a pseudo-secular object of worship—namely the state and everything associated with it—with a divine object of worship. Due to the continuing power of tradition, the divine is still more attractive to non-elites. When religion is an instrument of political opposition, it not only becomes further politicized, its spiritual and moral character is destroyed.

#### *Religion and the Crisis of National Identity*

Prolonged conflict at all levels of social life leads to the burgeoning of a culture of conflict where society is pitted against the state, and social groups are pitted against each other. This enormous confusion in society hampers the nation-building process and leads to a deep identity crisis. If the nation-state does not give its citizens a convincing, attractive national identity, they will either cling to their traditional identities and communities, or create new communities in different social settings.

This is why a new 'fictive' nation has grown in the squatter districts encircling major cities of many semi-modern countries caught between modernity and tradition. No longer peasants, they are also not city-dwellers. Moreover, most are not benefiting from the process of modernization. Thus, the appeal of religion is particularly strong, given its utopian promises. The members of this fictive nation do not feel represented by the singular political identity that is imposed on them by the state. They feel that they belong to a broader religious community, which is larger than local areas or even nations. This community has its own rules, mores and bonds, which are considered more reliable because they are believed to be divine. Traditional people are receptive to this religious discourse because it is simple; it does not need a coherent

political or economic program. Its call for justice, equality, solidarity and unity—goals still not achieved by secular-nationalist regimes—is enough to rally millions to the cause. Such a movement erodes faith in nationalism, or citizenship of a nation, that has disappointed most of its members. Thus, religion replaces national citizenship with membership in a community of believers.

The holistic logic of politicized religion becomes an obstacle to the development of democracy and a Western standard of civil rights because it too imposes a singular identity and life style. Hence, the political struggles often entail complex identity conflicts.

#### THE TURKISH CASE

Modern Turkey emerged out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, which ruled over three continents. Nationalism was a disruptive ideology that tore the Empire asunder. Influenced by the ideas of the French Revolution and dissatisfied with the Ottoman administration, diverse peoples struggled to carve nation-states out of the Ottoman Empire during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Turkish nationalism thus grew out of two conditions: On the one hand, battles with insurgent nationalities encouraged a sense of cohesion among the remaining peoples and territories. On the other hand, at the end of the 20th century, the Ottoman Empire was reduced to mainly Turks and other Muslims.

Nationalities in the Ottoman administrative system were classified not on the basis of ethnicity, but religion. Within the religious groups, ethnically different entities existed. The loss of Turkey's cosmopolitan character, together with vast chunks of territory, left its imprint on Turkish political culture. Fear of partition and subversion constantly haunted the Turkish elite and bred growing suspicion of foreigners and their sinister domestic collaborators who wanted to divide up the country and undermine national unity.

In the Western experience, market economies, a proliferating middle class and industrialization prioritized liberty, social justice and equality as important political values and brought about a political and economic transformation that led to the creation of modern national identities. However, most of these prerequisites did not exist in Turkey in the early 1920s, when the Republic was established. There was no widespread market economy that would produce a strong business class determined to overthrow the

traditional regime and establish modern economic relations. An underdeveloped economy did not allow the growth of a sizeable professional middle-class, which could have formulated principles and institutions guaranteeing individual freedoms and popular sovereignty. Similarly, there was no urban working class that could advocate social justice and act as the conscience of the new regime.

The founding elite of Republican Turkey was composed of the young military and civilian officers of the Ottoman administration. The Republic was created by a bureaucratic elite with strong centralist tendencies and a desire to bury the dynastic and semi-theocratic past. They wanted to make the new regime national and secular, which would legitimize their position as the new ruling elite.

The new leaders believed that they were charged with the mission of breaking with the past and creating a new nation. The Ottoman era and everything associated with it, except a few glorious moments of conquest and imperial grandeur, was condemned or discounted in history books and official parlance. The disconnection of society from its past allowed the ruling elite to see the Turkish people as an entity ready to be molded according to their vision of what a society and nation should be. This was to be a revolution from above.

In search of a unifying myth, long forgotten roots of the pre-Ottoman, pre-Islamic era were re-introduced. However, this process was construed not as a scientific endeavor but as ideological glue for national cohesion. In the absence of a medieval high culture that could be labeled 'Turkish,' the nationalist elite found their glory in a history that never was. The search for, and consolidation of, a new national identity were carried to such extremes in the 1930s that theories like the Sun Theory of Language were concocted. According to this "theory," all languages emerged out of Turkish. As a reminder of those days, the presidential banner consists of a sun representing the Turkish Republic encircled by 16 stars, symbolizing the Turkish states that were presumably created by Turks throughout history. This fabricated glorious past was a panacea for Turkish pride wounded by the loss of empire and reincarnated as a poor, backward society that was occupied during the First World War.

In pursuit of legitimacy for the new regime, two things happened. First, ties with religion were cut. In a matter of 10 years, the state abolished the spiritual pinnacle of the Sunni Muslim world, the

Caliphate, severing ties not only with Turkey's Islamic past but also with the Islamic world, which nominally recognized the Ottoman sultan as the head of Islam. The Republic adopted the Latin alphabet for use in Turkish. A parallel program to purge the language of Arabic and Persian loanwords was put into effect. Swiss, French and Italian laws replaced Ottoman ones that had been partly based on religion. The Republic discouraged traditional attire and secularized the educational system. All autonomous religious institutions and their financial resources were brought under government control. However, all of these administrative reforms to change society and facilitate secularism remained basically limited to urban centers, which contained only 20 percent of the Turkish population at the time. Until the 1950s, the bulk of Turkey's rural population remained untouched, isolated and traditional, while in the cities, modernity permeated most aspects of social life. This change created a volatile social fabric where the new and old, the modern and the traditional, East and West, the secular and the anti-secular, and the rich and the poor lived side by side with few points of contact.

Second, the elite set about to establish a new national Turkish identity. Just as it was planned that secularization would emancipate the nation from the fetters of religion, Turkish identity would iron out ethnic and cultural differences and produce a homogenized population. This strategy led to the policy of denying the existence of national minorities in Turkey. All existing Muslim minorities were granted a kind of Turkishness. For example, the largest non-Turkish Muslim minority in Anatolia—the Kurds—became Mountain Turks. Paradoxically, however, by forcing all Muslims into a Turkish identity, the new regime was also associating Turkish identity with Islam, which was contrary to its secularization project. This built-in contradiction would later make it easier for non-state actors to politicize religion. "Aren't we all Muslims, so why do we argue whether we agree on the principles of religion (Islam) to guide social life or not?" became the most commonly asked question in the political debate of the 1990s.

The Turkification process had already begun during the period of the Young Turks in the latter years of the Ottoman Empire. The Young Turks learned the power of nationalism from the struggle of Ottoman peoples whom they fought against to keep the remaining parts of the Empire together. By the end of the First World War and the Turko-Greek War, which lasted from

1919 to 1922, there were few non-Muslim peoples left in Anatolia, which subsequently became the Turkish motherland. The majority of Turkey's two million Armenians were deported to Syria and Mesopotamia in 1915 by the Ottoman Young Turk administration, so that they would not side with advancing Russian troops and declare independence in eastern Turkey. Deportations continued until 1918 and it has been estimated that as many as 1.5 million Armenians died or were killed en route.<sup>3</sup> The remaining Greeks, who had not fled after the Turko-Greek War, were exchanged for Turks (in fact Muslims) in Greece under a treaty that went into effect in 1924. This homogenization of the population helped the Republican elite declare the rest of the population Turkish.

However, the initial aim of the founding elite was not to create an ethnically "pure" nation. Cognizant of the fact that Anatolia was still more cosmopolitan than was officially recognized and that they were the heirs of a multi-national, multi-cultural empire, they named the state the Republic of Turkey, rather than the Turkish Republic. The founding elites were attempting to substitute Turkish identity for Ottoman identity. However, Ottomanism was a supra-identity that allowed sub or cultural-ethnic identities to coexist with it. Ottoman (the house of Osman) was the name of the ruling dynasty, which gave its name to the all-encompassing state. Hence, it was ethnically neutral. Turkish identity, in contrast, was ethnic in nature.

Because of Turkey's restrictive national identification, trouble and restlessness in southeastern Anatolia was always associated with Kurdish identity by both Ankara and the Kurds themselves. Kurds believed that all their difficulties were the result of their Kurdish identity. Ethnic differences became the basis of sour relations between the Kurdish community and the central government, although not the Turkish people in general. This adversity, however, did not affect the Kurds who did not politically emphasize their ethnic identity. They, as all citizens of Turkey, had access to education, politics and the highest posts in the government, including the army, which is practically, though not legally, denied to non-Muslim minorities. The poverty and isolation of southeastern Anatolia, which is predominantly populated by

<sup>3</sup> Joel Krieger, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 50.

Kurds, is the least integrated part of the country and further emphasized the Kurds' feelings of alienation. These factors provided little motivation for many rural Turks and Kurds to accept Ankara's values which they felt to be both geographically and ideologically distant.

Neither the secularization nor the Turkification of the nation was negotiated with the people in a serious way. The Grand National Assembly, Turkey's national parliament, was an elite club and held unchallenged power. The Kurdish elite, mainly made up of tribal chieftains and large landholders, was co-opted and enjoyed the privileged position of parliamentarians. The people were unorganized, powerless and thus did not challenge the philosophy of the regime or the way in which reforms and socio-cultural projects were implemented.

Decades of indoctrination and a heavy dose of nationalist education created a deep sense of pride in being a Turk. Moreover, citizens of the Republic had objective reasons to be proud. They were the heirs of a major world empire and had created a new state by rescuing their country from the victors of the First World War. Through significant economic and political reforms, they were advancing on the road toward contemporary Western civilization. Although the country was poor, its pragmatic policies saved it from the devastation of the Second World War.

However, the euphoria started to dissipate in the second half of the 1950s. Problems caused by political authoritarianism and the limitations of an import-substitution economy were further exacerbated by the failure to manage massive urban migration of people from the countryside. Wide protests staged by labor organizations, professional and student groups began to disrupt the country.

## THE EVOLUTION OF SYSTEM AND IDENTITY CRISIS

### *Evolution of the Turkish State*

The ensuing spiral of protest led to the development of an alternative network of organizations, which was not controlled by the centralized power of the state. In the 1960s, a vibrant leftist movement emerged and shaped politics for the next two decades. The Confederation of Revolutionary Workers, which led massive labor strikes, became the locomotive of protest among the urban industrial workforce. The Turkish Worker's Party

succeeded in capturing 18 seats in Parliament and changed the political discourse in an unprecedented fashion. Intellectual groups formulated a Turkish brand of socialism. Youth organizations, partly affected by the world student movement, made every day an occasion of heated debate. Intellectual organizations, like Revolutionary Way and Revolutionary Left, turned toward militancy, as successive governments seemed increasingly incapable of dealing with mounting economic problems. Attacks of right-wing groups on the Left further sharpened the latter's militancy. Hostilities mounted between the groups and the governing system was unable to meet social and economic demands.

In 1971, a military coup swept away leftist groups. Under the guise of fighting communism, the coup leaders violated due legal procedures and human rights. They disbanded and imprisoned the members of the Turkish Workers Party, the Confederation of Revolutionary Workers and all of the youth organizations. When the military returned power to a civilian government in 1973, they left a new constitution with many restrictions on basic freedoms. The new constitution placed the Armed Forces, operating through the National Security Council, in a position to oversee the administration of the country.<sup>6</sup> For the rest of the 1970s, a series of Nationalist Front coalition governments ruled the country, with two short intervals of Republican People's Party governments. Although the Republican People's Party had declared itself as "leftist," it did not affect the political landscape much. Its inability to define its goals in practical terms and the enormous restrictions imposed by the military-designed constitution kept the party in check.

Despite strong state control over politics, populist nationalism and religious revivalism started to emerge during this time. Religious organizations, which had surfaced in the 1960s, mushroomed in the 1970s. Different *tarikats* and Sufi orders helped those of lesser means cope with the problems of modernization and became clubs for dislocated groups seeking solidarity in a changing world.

This religious project was further reinforced by Turkey's security position during the Cold War. Turkey was considered to be at the heart of a "green belt" fighting against the "red belt" of

<sup>6</sup> Cengiz Çandar, "Redefining Turkey's Political Center," *Journal of Democracy*, 10, no. 4 (October 1999) pp. 131-32.

communism. A mildly religious country obedient to secular authority, coupled with patriotic zeal, was viewed as an effective barrier against the political deviation posed by the Left within and communism outside.

This strategy resulted in the formal integration of nationalism and religion. At the center of this new ideology was the Nationalist Action Party. This Party and its affiliated organizations invented a new nationalism which they called the "Turkish-Islamic synthesis." It attracted low and middle class people for whom religion occupied a central role, but who also considered themselves nationalists.

Other more religiously oriented groups, disenchanted by nationalism, sought salvation in political Islam. For these groups, the nation should not be a secular political entity but rather a community of believers. Because of the highly religious nature of these parties, they have usually been banned once they gained any sort of popularity, but are an important force as they continue to rise under different guises. The first such party, the Nationalist Order Party, was closed down for becoming too "independent" and radical. It emerged later as the National Salvation Party and was subsequently banned by the military government after the 1980 coup. It later reformed itself as the Welfare Party. Political Islam's current incarnation is the Virtue Party.

While most of these parties opposed secular nationalism, they found it more expedient to oppose the infidel Left. However, this strategy eventually resulted in a violent crisis. The government had ignored the arming, training and coordinated attacks of Nationalist Action Party youth organizations of the Leftists, and the Leftists' subsequent retaliation. Politics became a bloody confrontation. Many young people on the Right and Left died, and prominent democratic intellectuals were assassinated in order to intimidate society. By the end of the 1970s, politics could not be contained in political parties and within the walls of Parliament. It had spilled onto the streets.

It was at this time that the establishment divided into political and bureaucratic wings.<sup>7</sup> This schism, which still prevails today, led to the coining of the concept of inner state. The inner state, which is the bureaucratic wing of the establishment, is primarily

<sup>7</sup> Metin Heper, "Consolidating Turkish Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, 3, no. 2 (April 1992) p. 108.

controlled by the army. It works together with the political wing to preserve the status quo. Any substantive change to the status quo must be endorsed by the inner state.

The perceived loss of state impartiality, as well as society's fragmentation, contributed to the polarization of politics, forcing political parties away from parliamentary practices to seek ideological allies in society. Politics lost its ability to design practical policies to meet exigencies, manage change and reconcile differences. It became a vehicle for populism, which could only function if state amenities were distributed to party or coalition supporters. Political forces, legitimate or illegitimate, formal or informal, started to see each other as adversaries. Politics became a battleground for economic advantage as economic difficulties aggravated tensions.

When corruption and inefficiency had reached an intolerable level, the bureaucratic-military complex stepped in again in 1980 and cleared the political scene of all existing actors. In the years following the 1980 military coup, legal and human rights violations reached extreme levels. Political parties were banned and their affiliates liquidated, and leading members of defunct parties were barred from the political and electoral process.

In 1987, the newly founded Motherland Party of Turgut Özal received a mandate to enact important reforms, especially in the economic sphere. However, Özal's initiative in the social and cultural realms was limited not only by his narrow social vision, but also by the enormous resistance of the old bureaucratic and political guard. Furthermore, the army resisted solving the Kurdish problem by any way other than force.

However, during the Özal administration a special effort was made to incorporate different ideological trends into the party structure, which eased existing political tensions. Moreover, Özal's economic reforms led to an economic boom, which further eased tensions. This period of relative peace "tamed" many of the old radical political actors and organizations, whose political rights were reinstated in the middle of the 1980s with a national referendum. But Özal's reforms were not broad enough to mend the enormous dislocations and inequalities in society. Moreover, the increased pace of change and the impact of opening the country to the outside world threatened many of the traditional and lower social echelons. Turkey's problems of modernization, change management and legal and political liberalization remained

basically untouched despite Özal's many attempts at reform. Although Özal succeeded in instituting a certain degree of economic liberalization, his emphasis on social issues did not come until after he was elected president in October 1989. By that point, he no longer possessed the executive powers of the prime minister. His party lost control of Parliament in the October 1991 elections and Özal died suddenly in 1993, thereby stalling further reforms.

### *Political Crisis*

Despite Özal's reforms, Turkey still has severe economic problems, including low productivity, high inflation, depressed wages and a skewed income distribution. Two stark examples serve to describe the general quality of life for millions living in Turkey: The average amount of education is 3.6 years overall and only 2.4 years for women.<sup>8</sup> Average income per capita is US\$2,878. (Note: In purchasing power, this figure is close to US\$6,000.) In the Kurdish areas and in central Anatolia, the breeding ground of radical Kurdish and Turkish nationalism, these figures are even lower. This can be attributed to government failure to develop these areas, as well as to the resistance of tradition which has stymied individualism and entrepreneurship. These severe economic problems, coupled with corruption, have resulted in dramatic repercussions for Turkish society.

These factors have led citizens of Turkey to distrust one another as well as formal institutions. Two reliable opinion polls conducted in 1990 and 1999 indicate that only 10 percent of Turkish citizens think that people can be trusted compared to between 52 and 56 percent in the developed world. The same polls found trust in formal institutions—the Parliament, the government, the police force and the judiciary—very low. The same is true for political parties, which are perceived as hierarchic, boss-oriented, machines of mass manipulation serving their own interests rather than the people.<sup>9</sup>

There have been five primary consequences of this situation. First, deviation from legal standards by the state and by the rest of the society has led to the development of an enormous illegal

<sup>8</sup> State Institute of Statistics, *National Census, 1997*, Ankara.

<sup>9</sup> Yılmaz Eşmer, *Devrim, Evrim, Statüko: Türkiye'de Sosyal, Siyasal, Ekonomik Değerler* (Istanbul: TESEV, 1999) pp. 33, 43-44 and Üstün Ergüder, Yılmaz Eşmer and Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, *Türk Toplumunun Değerleri* (Istanbul: TUSİAD, 1991).

economy and rampant official corruption. Some of the operatives in the black market were used against Kurdish organized crime, which provided financial support to the PKK as well, which made crime pay politically. Populist nationalism and ethnic (Kurdish) nationalism degenerated into common crime. This atmosphere of lawlessness revealed the need to restore morality in social life and public administration. However, this is virtually impossible as long as the state remains closed and immune to public scrutiny.

Second, individual citizens have challenged the official identity imposed on them by the state: obedient to the state, secular-nationalist and, although not openly expressed, Sunni Muslim. Sunni Islam is propagated by state institutions such as the mosques and the Administration of Religious Affairs and by formal education in schools. Since the state identifies not only with Sunnism but more specifically with the Hanefi school, millions of Alevi, who adhere to a more liberal sect of Islam, have been alienated.<sup>10</sup> The Kurds' discomfort with this official identity was evident in the successive rebellions throughout the Republican era. But more peaceful voices among Kurds also caught public attention. Ninety percent of the Kurds living in Turkey did not want partition or an independent state. Rather, they wanted to be respected as Kurds and live as citizens in Turkey, but one in which they would be treated fairly and equitably.<sup>11</sup>

Turks were also confused about their identity. They had been denied liberalism in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s and denied a leftist orientation since the beginning of, but especially after, the Cold War. They were taught to be secular, but religion was injected into education to create resistance against alien ideologies like socialism. The government tried to contain Kurdish nationalism by promoting Turkish nationalism, which made Turkish identity increasingly ethnic-oriented.

Third, a new kind of nationalism has developed that is quite different from the nationalism of the founding Republic. It is not Western-oriented, but rather traditionalist, isolationist and supports a role for religion in public life. It has nothing to do with the modernizing bourgeois culture that the Republican elite

<sup>10</sup> Although there is no official census on the number of Kurds and Alevi in Turkey, estimates suggest that two-thirds of the Alevi are of ethnic Turkish descent, while one-third are of Kurdish descent.

<sup>11</sup> Dogu Ergil, *The Eastern Question* (Ankara: TOBB, 1995).

revered and adopted. What it shares with the construct of the founding elite is its statist character; it puts the state in the center of social life as the provider and protector as well as the source of political power.

This movement has been led by the populist nationalists, who were devastated and betrayed by the state's rejection of their violent anti-Left tactics before the 1980 coup. Even though they offered themselves to the service of the state and became virtually adjuncts of the security forces before 1980, the military government that took power after the coup disbanded their organization and imprisoned their members. Nonetheless, they rose to prominence again when the Kurdish nationalist insurrection began in 1984. During the 15 year struggle with the PKK, two and a half million young men fought in southeastern Turkey and thousands died. All were hailed as martyrs and exalted. These sentiments and the feeling of entrapment of the lower-class nationalists brought the Nationalist Action Party back to Parliament in the April 1999 elections as the second largest party. Today the Nationalist Action Party is a partner in a tripartite coalition government. No doubt its social character, its opposition to multi-culturalism, its emphasis on homogenous ethnicity and its allegiance to ardent statism in public life will influence Turkish politics in the future.

Fourth, the economic liberalization realized under Özal during the 1980s unleashed enormous private potential that created a sizeable business class able to compete internationally. Sociologically, they can be labeled as the Turkish bourgeoisie although a large fraction of this group is thought to be Kurdish. This group no longer desires state-centered, restrictive and isolationist nationalism. They want the state to be transparent and withdrawn from economic and socio-cultural life. Together, with the professional middle-class that is well-educated and well-connected to the outside world, they are the most internationally oriented force in society.

Economic liberalization in the 1980s and 1990s awakened the economic potential of Anatolia. Today, there are exporters in almost every province of Turkey. They have not acquired their status by relying on the state; rather, they are the products of the traditional, parochial society in which they have grown up. They consider religion to be their moral guide in their journey to a new world, as well as a point of social solidarity with like-minded people in their

communities. They support religious, civic organizations that concern the state with their relative independence. A sizeable group supported the Islamist Welfare Party and now has closer ties with the Virtue Party, although they are not necessarily fundamentalist. They may very well be the Turkish example of secularization through the market economy as described by Max Weber.<sup>12</sup>

Fifth, there is a very active dialogue concerning the nature of democracy and its incarnation in Turkey. Since 1950, the year the Democrat Party won fair elections, thereby ending single-party rule since 1923, Turkey has been called a democracy by its rulers. However, that democracy has always been a tutelary one. In spite of this, Turkey has not committed the mistake of denying religious parties their electoral gains, like politicians did in Tunisia and Algeria. The Virtue Party, with more than a hundred deputies in Parliament, is a current example of this restraint.

Under the banner of the Welfare Party, the Islamic movement emerged from the 1995 elections as the largest party in Parliament with 21.7 percent of the vote. While in power as the main coalition partner, it proved that it had no focus and no concrete policies to improve the economic and social system. Moreover, its inflammatory rhetoric against modern sectors of society and the West reduced its effectiveness and further added to existing tensions. The coalition government, led by the Welfare Party, was "convinced" by the military to step down in 1997—in what Cengiz Çandar calls "a post-modern coup."<sup>13</sup> This coup calls into question the democratic nature of the Republic.

This debate became more real when the Constitutional Court closed the Welfare Party in 1999. Now, its successor, the Virtue Party, is a party to the democratic discourse. It has completely eliminated its inflammatory rhetoric against Western values and institutions from its political program. The Virtue Party seems to understand that democracy and the rule of law are good for everyone, not merely as an instrument to attain power. They tout the West to prove that they are more democratic than Islamist and they voted for Turkey's candidacy in the European Union, which they had previously criticized as a "Christian club."

<sup>12</sup> Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey. The Case of Beşiktaş* (New York: SUNY, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> Cengiz Çandar, *Sabah*, Istanbul, 28 June 1997.

All of these elements demonstrate the potency and significance of the debate around the nature of the regime in Turkey. Can we come to a consensus on the regime to reconcile and to include all groups, opinions and convictions? The lack of such a consensus has not served the interest of society and has failed to bring the prominence and prosperity for which the nation yearns so much.

#### WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

The above analysis suggests that the hegemonic political system is no longer capable of leading a socially and culturally diverse Turkish society that has a parliamentary tradition dating to the 19th century. With a population of 65 million and growing, sufficient agricultural land and water and a dynamic private sector, Turkey so far has realized a miniscule part of its potential. Because of its self-imposed limitations, Turkey cannot yet play its rightful role, afforded to it by both history and geography.<sup>14</sup> Turkey sits at the crossroads of the Balkan-Caucasus axis with a door to Central Asia, as well as the Black Sea-Middle-East axis. If Turkey can rid itself of its structural fetters, it can easily become a model for other nations.

Most people in Turkey have achieved a better understanding of the root causes of their society's problems. It is clear that the country's underdevelopment and prevailing traditionalism is not the result of Western imperialism as once claimed by the Left. Also, religion is not a barrier for candidacy to the European Union, as claimed by religious fundamentalists and secular skeptics. The effect of politicized religion, however, may be detrimental to political liberty and stability. Further, ethnic separatism only reinforces militarism and delays further democratization, as the leader of the PKK has admitted during his trial.

It remains to be seen if Turkey perpetuates its anti-democratic secularist policy, or decides to create a new democratic constitution where traditional groups with religious sensitivities, as well as citizens with other ethnic backgrounds, can feel included. If the official policy of *laïcism* has failed to secularize society because it has not been supported by commercialization, industrialization, modern education and urbanization, then religious affairs should be taken from state control and left to civil society. Only then can

<sup>14</sup> Chris Hahn, "The Nation-State, Religion and Uncivil Society: Two Perspectives from the Periphery" *Daedalus*, 126, Issue 2 (Spring 1997) p. 43.

the sociological process of secularization proceed.

It is also clear that a modernization process driven from above but with little support from below cannot transform a traditional society. Political changes need to be publicly negotiated, not imposed on society. Only a national consensus based on a new social contract—not force—can take the country beyond its self-generated conflicts, isolation and authoritarianism. This contract must materialize in a new (but this time civilian) constitution that defines the nation as a multi-cultural entity not based on race, ethnicity, creed or political conviction. Major social conflicts should not be viewed as mere incidents of terrorism to be suppressed by sheer force. Violence breeds more violence and sows the seeds for further polarization that could adversely affect future generations. Finally, the price of dealing with radical movements outside a legal framework is higher than dealing with them in a legal or rational framework. Diversity is not a crime; it is necessary to reconcile and orchestrate these differences rather than suppress them.

Increasing consensus around these ideas, coupled with criticism of the system, has been further facilitated by the acceptance of Turkey as a candidate for EU membership. Discussions concerning democratization and social transformation have become more immediate and pragmatic because there are 90,000 pages of EU regulations and guidelines for adapting to European legal, political, economic and cultural standards.

This is indeed a revolution that does not require revolutionaries; it only requires vision, leadership and professional discipline devoid of populism. How this will transpire remains to be seen. But one thing is beyond debate and that is the irreparable crisis of the hegemonic, or state-nation model, which has failed Turkey for so long. ❖