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Pseudo-Democratic Politics and Populist Possibilities: The Rise and Demise of Turkey’s Refah Party

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ABSTRACT Within the span of only a few years, Turkish politics witnessed the dramatic rise and fall of the Refah Party. This transformation from relative obscurity to the head of a ruling coalition and eventual banning was caused by a combination of features inherent in the Turkish political system and the party itself. Turkish democracy features the continued interference of the military in domestic political affairs on the one hand and a preponderance of largely centrist and bland ‘mainstream’ parties on the other. Nevertheless, the existence of ostensibly democratic institutions such as elections or a parliament enable potential political aspirants who are outside the mainstream to make bids for power through officially sanctioned channels. The Refah’s rise was a product of the perceived uniqueness of its ideological platform and its unparalleled focus on grass roots voter mobilization. Its fall, however, came when the military considered it to have overstepped the bounds of acceptable political behaviour within the country’s narrowly defined democracy.

Introduction

In June 1996, Turkey’s Refah (Welfare) Party (RP) was finally able to put together a ruling coalition government after charges of corruption had brought down the former coalition government which had held office for only three months. Headed by Necmettin Erbakan, the RP’s rise from relative obscurity only a few years ago has been noteworthy, especially given the Party’s vaguely religious and populist platform in the context of Turkey’s decidedly secular political environment. Within a year, in what many in Turkey called a ‘soft coup’, the Turkish military pushed the Refah out of office in June 1997. In fact, the RP was banned on January 16, 1998 after the Constitutional Court ruled that the party’s religious platform contradicted Turkey’s secular constitution. This article examines the underlying causes that facilitated the RP’s ascent from a political party that few took seriously until recently into the head of a ruling coalition. It also looks at the narrow limits on political activity permitted by

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Turkey’s ostensibly democratic political system, and especially the political role of the military, which ultimately led to the demise of the Refah Party.

At the broadest level, two major causes underlied the steady rise of the Refah Party in the early 1990s: the relative uniqueness of the RP as compared to the country’s other political parties, a uniqueness that is more a function of popular perceptions rather than features inherent to the Refah or its competitors; and the overall characteristics of the Turkish political system itself, in which parliamentary politics at the institutional level have not necessarily resulted in the evolution of viable links between the state and many people in the middle and the lower classes. Turkey’s democratization from above, begun in earnest in 1983, has not yet developed a sufficient and resonant mass basis. In a sense, Turkey’s democracy has been frozen at the state level. Party politics is vibrant, but public opinion polls reveal deep-seated detachment and cynicism on the part of the electorate and the people at large. Within this context, the Refah sought to portray itself as somehow different from other political parties. With a populist image, a vaguely Islamic platform, and an impressive organizational set-up actively trying to attract members and supporters, the party largely succeeded in distinguishing itself from the rest of the field. Along the way, the RP had its share of scandals and controversies, but these blemishes seemed to matter little to the party’s enthusiastic and growing rank and file and voters.

While general and municipal elections have been intermittent features of Turkish politics since the establishment of the Republic in 1923, these elections have until recently represented more or less the same power configuration of the same social forces. It is only in recent years, when the political ripple effects of the profound social and economic transformations of the 1980s and the early 1990s have come to the fore, that the political hegemony of the same old social classes is giving way to a more diverse political mosaic. The municipal elections of March 27, 1994 and the general elections of December 24, 1995 marked the most dramatic examples of such a departure from the past, prompting most Turks to take a second look at a party few had taken seriously before. Through these elections, the Refah (Welfare) Party was able to capture the mayor’s office in twenty-eight Turkish cities, substantially increase its share of the popular vote to more than 21%, and, although with difficulty, eventually put together a ruling parliamentary coalition. The Refah’s electoral successes were especially astounding in central and eastern Anatolia, regions long neglected by the country’s other political parties, thus giving resonance and a measure of justification to the Party’s popular image and its rhetoric as ‘champion of Eastern Turkey’. Nevertheless, any suppositions about the RP’s alleged regionalism were shattered when it added the offices of the mayors of Ankara and Istanbul, as well as twelve out of the eighteen major predominantly Kurdish municipalities in the southeast, to its list of electoral trophies.

2 Some of the other major cities in which the Refah won the mayor’s office in 1994 included Van, Erzurum, Rize, Trabzon, Kahramanmaras, Sivas, Kayseri, and Konya.

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While these successes are in themselves significant for any political party, their real importance comes to light when viewed in the larger context of Turkish politics and the Refah’s unique position within it. To begin with, the Refah’s platform and ideology were as religiously inspired as Turkey’s secular constitution and political climate seemed to allow, for some time at least. Thus the non-traditional, secularist strata of Turkish society, both politicians as well as lay people, were quite wary of the party’s agendas and intentions. This came at a time of diminishing confidence in the ability of most politicians to resuscitate the economy and rescue the nation from a seemingly intractable economic and political deadlock. Former Prime Minister Tansu Çiller’s centre-right coalition government was especially ineffective in remediying the country’s mounting economic ills and political malaise. Within this context, the Refah appeared poised to emerge as an even more significant force in the coming years.

Many circles in Turkey contend that a mere 21% electoral showing simply demonstrates that some 80% of all voting Turks do not support the RP. Besides, they argue, the party’s recent electoral victories simply demonstrate the people’s ‘protest votes’ against the status quo rather than a solid following for the Refah and its leaders. There is some truth to both of these arguments, especially in light of the Refah’s relatively slim electoral majority in the Turkish parliament, only barely enabling the party to put together a ruling coalition cabinet. Capturing only one fifth of the popular vote may not seem all that impressive in itself, but for Turkish politics in general and the RP in particular it is highly significant. The Refah represented—and continues to represent even after being banned—a new phenomenon in Turkish politics. It shifted the country’s traditional political ‘centre’ by aggressively mobilizing voters from the eastern parts of the country and the lowers rungs of the socio-economic scale. This it achieved through a populist (but seldom clearly articulated) platform and a uniquely organized strategy for voter mobilization. Although the RP’s strong electoral showings may be dismissed on a number of grounds, they do tell us that the Refah, both deliberately and inadvertently, represented significant changes in Turkey’s political landscape from what we have come to know over the last decade or so. This article will argue that the Refah Party’s success was based on the interplay of three factors: the nature and evolution of the Turkish political system; the generally acknowledged failure of most political parties and politicians in the post-1980 coup era; and the organizational capabilities and populist platforms of the RP and its ability to capitalize on the failures of others.

Within the span of a decade, the Refah’s once marginal presence in Turkish politics in 1984 could no longer be dismissed in the 1990s. In fact, the very necessity of outlawing the party—a severe blow to the image-conscious Turkish democracy—demonstrated its emergence as a powerful and threatening force in the political arena.

3 Sabah, 2 April 1994, p. 3.
Pseudo-Democratic Politics in Turkey

Politics in Parliamentary Pseudo-Democracies

The recent literature on democratization recognizes that transition processes often usher in political systems that are only nominally democratic and impose severe restrictions on the nature and extent of political participation by average citizens.\(^5\) Two of these unsatisfactory democracies, neither of which come close to the type of polity Robert Dahl defined as a ‘polyarchy’,\(^6\) are delegative presidential systems and parliamentary pseudo-democracies. Turkey’s position in the latter category, the following pages argue, greatly facilitated the Refah Party’s rise to power in 1996. Ironically, the very same dynamics, having to do with the restricted nature of Turkish democracy, resulted in the military easing the RP out of office within only a year.

By definition, delegative democracies are Caesar-like. These are a ‘new species’ of ostensibly democratic regimes that ‘rest on the premise that whoever wins election to the presidency is thereby entitled to govern as he or she sees fit, constrained only by the hard facts of existing power relations and by a constitutionally limited term of office.’\(^7\) Invariably, these are presidential systems, found almost exclusively in South America, in which the president ‘isolates himself from other political institutions and organized interests and bears sole responsibility for the success or failure of “his” policies.’\(^8\) There is little about the executive that makes it representative or accountable, except for the next presidential election, until which time the president dominates and personifies the system. Argentina, Brazil, and Peru are three of the most representative of such systems, although it is questionable as to whether Peru under Fujimori could be considered in any way democratic at all.\(^9\)

Although the label ‘delegative democracy’ accurately captures the essence and features of many restricted democracies with presidential executives, it does not adequately describe other ‘frozen’ democracies with parliamentary systems. Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and until recently Taiwan are all meant to be parliamentary democracies—with vibrant parliamentary politics, regular elections, active political parties, and frequent turn-over of incumbents—but none can be accurately listed in any one of the categories outlined above. In terms of degree, these democracies tend to be more democratic than delegative democracies but less so as compared to liberal democracies. In these hybrid systems, open, parliamentary politics coexist with significant political restrictions of one form or another on the citizenry. These proto- or pseudo-democracies, of which contemporary Turkey is one, often present perfect opportunities for populist

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\(^5\) For a succinct discussion of some of the different types of democratic systems see, Robert Pinkney, *Democracy in the Third World* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1993), especially pp. 8–11.


\(^8\) Ibid., p. 61.

\(^9\) Other examples include Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, and, arguably, the Philippines.
individuals and/or political parties to ascent to power. This, as will be shown below, was one of the main reasons for the rise of the Refah Party in Turkish politics.  

Unlike delegative democracies, parliamentary pseudo-democracies tend to have a wider popular base and a more evolved set of institutions through which the state and society interact. The institution of parliament, as well as the political parties involved in it, form links through which members of the popular classes could take part in politics, voice their grievances, choose their local representatives, and even run for elected office if they so desire. But these are the institutional characteristics of poliarchies, which these polities are not. There are three main reasons for this. First, party politics in these political systems is an almost exclusively elitist phenomenon. Secondly, the degree of political space allowed is often narrow and curtailed by reason of ‘national security’ or other similar justifications. Finally, the absence of democratic consolidation is in large measure a product of, and in turn further reinforces, the lack of a viable, democratic political culture.

Most of the political parties that dominate politics in pseudo-democracies have ideologies that are largely centrist, broadly nationalist, and tend to be inclusive of all social classes and strata. A relic of a once powerful nationalist movement—or, as in Turkey, claiming to be its rightful heirs—these parties often compete with one another over the question of which one is truer to the path laid by the nation’s modern founding fathers. Thus party leaders frequently try to draw themselves closer to the image of nationalist heroes and leaders: Gandhi and Nehru in India; Iqbal and Bhutto in Pakistan; Atatürk and İnönü in Turkey, and so on. To be elected, these and other party members often rely on their family legacy, name and reputation, their prestige and stature in their local neighbourhood, and other similar qualifications that have little to do with ideology or their political qualifications. Over time, the party becomes less of an ideological and agenda-driven forum than an instrument for furthering careers, comprised more of an increasingly insular and isolated elite than of idealists and dedicated members. ‘Democracy for the privileged,’ a phrase

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10 Also noteworthy is the increasing popularity and rise of extremist Hindu nationalist individuals and parties in the 1990s in Indian politics. For an overview of this phenomenon see Robert Eric Frykenberg, “Accounting for Fundamentalism in South Asia: Ideologies and Institutions in Historical Perspective”, Martin Marty and Scott Appleby (eds) Accounting for Fundamentalism: The Dynamic Character of Movements (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 591–616.


12 A complete discussion of pseudo-democracies deserve much fuller treatment than space here allows. What follows are only some of the relevant highlights of these political systems, especially as they relate to Turkey. For a fuller treatment see, Mehran Kamrava, Understanding Comparative Politics: A Framework for Analysis (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 92–95.

13 Interestingly, former Prime Minister Tansu Çiller’s centre-right party is called the True Path Party (Dogru Yol—DYP).


15 Doh Chull Shin, ‘On the Third Wave of Democratization’, World Politics, Vol. 47, No. 1 (October 1994), pp. 145–6. Party members need not necessarily be ‘‘expedient’’ or ‘‘superfluous’’ democrats’ to obstruct democracy’s consolidation, though some certainly are. Most come to take democracy for granted over time, 279
often used in reference to Central American democracies, may be too strong a description for this category of systems. They definitely are, nevertheless, elite-based in both composition and orientation, and even in policies and agendas. Steadily—though often gradually—losing their popular edge, these parties help institutionalize democracy and yet at the same time impede its societal consolidation.

This type of an environment provides a perfect opportunity for a populist political party, especially if the party’s ideological populism is complemented by a grassroots organizational component. The political liberties afforded by the state allow the party to engage in propaganda and recruitment campaigns; the lack of grassroots organization, especially those with a political edge, allow it to tap into the people’s desire to organize and express themselves politically. In essence, the populist party serves as the missing emotive and cultural nexus between actors within the state and the larger strata of society. The Refah Party, populist par excellence, had played exactly such a role in Turkey.

Political space in pseudo-democracies is also limited by built-in, often legally-sanctioned restrictions on competition, participation, and liberties, usually imposed under the banner of national security. Frequently these political systems face real and serious challenges from secessionist domestic minorities or from neighbors with territorial ambitions, or both—the Kashmiri conflict, among others, in India and Pakistan, the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Kurds in Turkey. It is no surprise that long after formally departing from the political arena, the military in most of these countries continues to exert considerable influence, often reserving the right to intervene in the political process if its own, and the nation’s, interests are endangered. In fact, in each of the examples cited above, democratic tenets have at one point or another been compromised due to military operations launched in response to regional rebellions. The Turkish government’s response to the ‘Kurdish problem’ is a paradigmatic example of this facet of pseudo-democracies.

Ultimately more important than the other two features of pseudo-democracies, and in many ways sustaining them, is their lack of a popular—rather than elite-based—democratic political culture. In a sense, the spread of a democratic political culture—of democratic values and beliefs—signifies the consolidation of democracy. In pseudo-democracies, elite democratic commitments, if and

15 continued equating it with the simple ability to vote rather than seeing it as a social phenomenon with roots in civil society and popular consensus.
17 The Chinese threat to Taiwan and the separatist Moro movement in the Philippines could be added to this list as well. An important exception is Spain, by all accounts a polyarchy, which is nevertheless faced with the separatism of the Basques.
19 The Kurdish issue in the context of Turkish politics has been exhaustively examined in a number of articles. For a recent example see, Eric Rouleau, ‘Turkey: Beyond Atatürk’, Foreign Policy, No. 103, Summer 1996, pp. 72–76.

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when they do exist, have not yet gained a significant footing at the societal level. Frequently, the ruling elite is ambivalent about or even suspicious of independent, autonomous associational activities that are not tied to its own party structure or agendas. There is thus a marked absence of a dense, vibrant, and democratic civil society. Civil society organizations are politically autonomous and self-regulating grass-roots groups. They provide venues not only for the pursuit of particular, issue-driven agendas, but also furnish their participants with forums for organization, expression, and, in one form or another, political participation. In pseudo-democracies, most of the benefits of democracy are enjoyed by actors who are already affiliated with the state rather than by representatives of the broader strata of society. In other words, the political actors and parties that were part of the transition bargain or its later beneficiaries can take part in the state’s political contests, but this privilege does not extend to many of the autonomous and self-organized groups within society.

The Turkish Democracy

The democratic essence of Turkish politics has long been questioned and debated. According to two Turkish scholars, in fact, ‘there are serious difficulties and limitations involved in the development of Turkish democracy’, the government having imposed ‘narrow limits’ within which political activities can take place. In December 1994, for example, the Turkish Human Rights Association reported that in the previous month alone there had been some 383 killings (most of those killed were Kurdish separatists in the southeast), 36 cases of torture, 15 individuals had disappeared, and 41 villages were forcefully evacuated, the responsibility for all of which lay with government authorities. The Association also provided the names of 107 imprisoned ‘politicians, intellectuals, and scientists’. Earlier in the same year, the pro-Kurdish Democracy Party (DEP) was banned and its eight elected MPs jailed. A full-blown war rages in the country’s southeast region between government forces and separatist guerrillas belonging to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). There are almost


26 See article by Leyla Zana, one of the DEP members jailed, in The International Herald Tribune, 7 December 1994.

27 The government’s approach to the Kurdish problem has met with the general approval of most Turkish voters, especially those in Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir, and other major cities in the west. See, for example, Ismet G. Imset, ‘Southeast Burden to Grow’, Turkish Probe, 8 April 1994 pp. 12–15.
daily media reports about the army’s ‘eradication’ of Kurdish ‘terrorists’ and ‘bandits’ through its continuing counter-insurgency efforts in the southeast.28

Democratic politics suffered repeated reversals especially during the Özal era, when the Prime Minister turned his own political party (the Motherland) into a ‘fan club’, exploited patronage with unsurpassed skill, and showed little or no regards for democratic procedures or opposition.29 Throughout the 1980s, for example, the Özal government made repeated amendments to the electoral laws in order to strengthen his own party’s position.30 Özal’s undemocratic licenses were partly the result of the legal and institutional legacies of the 1980–83 martial law interlude, many directives of which remained in effect afterwards and continued to limit the democratic space made available to various political actors. But equally significant was the absence of a vibrant democratic political culture. Even today, when compared to the days of Turgut Özal the level of public scrutiny of the government has greatly increased, it is still not clear whether a democratic political culture—one in which there is a democratic consensus and an imperative on the part of society to actively safeguard the democratic integrity of the system—has in fact gained a sufficient hold among most sectors of the Turkish electorate. The political norms that do have resonance in Turkish society, especially among the politically more active and aware upper and upper middle classes, are still predominantly Kemalist rather than strictly democratic.31

Some of the main features of Turkey’s Kemalist political culture include statism; an accompanying centre-periphery schism; and a persistent inability to come into terms with the more subtle nuances of democratic politics.32 Most notably, Turkey’s resilient statist tradition has led to the centralization of power among a consistent core of elites.33 Even the five-year ban imposed by the military government in 1980 on political activity by members of the parliament at the time of the coup, designed to introduce ‘new politics’ and ‘new politicians’, failed to substantially change the composition of the elite political classes in either the parliament or in the political parties.34 Thus as in most other pseudo-democracies, Turkish politics is ridden with familiar faces and personalities, cyclically rising to the pinnacle of power and then falling from grace, only to later rise and fall again. The political life of the current president, Süleyman Demirel, who has been in and out of power no less than seven times since 1965 (and even jailed once following the 1980 coup), is representative of the careers of most of the country’s politicians. But for all its pretenses and lip-services to democracy, this elite remains incapable of accommodating dissenting voices within itself and, as a result, is marked by chronic disagreements and internal

31 Ibid., pp. 219–220.
33 Ibid., p. 21.
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conflicts.\textsuperscript{35} The chaotic nature of the Turkish political party scene is a direct result of this seemingly perpetual intra-elite conflict.\textsuperscript{36} Even now that the Refah’s gains changed the usual picture of Turkish politics, the other parties are more preoccupied with affixing blame on one another than with addressing their constituents’ needs or forwarding new and innovative proposals.\textsuperscript{37}

The elite centralism of the political system has accentuated the systemic and, in turn, regional dichotomy of Turkish politics. The enormous differences that mark the Ankara-Istanbul political centre as opposed to the eastern periphery are well known and need not be repeated here.\textsuperscript{38} Suffice it to say that with the west having emerged as a greater focus of political and, inevitably, economic attention, the ensuing political vacuum in eastern Anatolia has become even more palpable in recent years. Despite a number of policies and programs aimed at reducing the east-west gap,\textsuperscript{39} Ankara appears to still view the east as a social and political backwater and a cultural embarrassment, much the same way as it views the Kurds in the southeast as an irritating nuisance.\textsuperscript{40} It is thus more concerned with the administration of the region rather than its development, more with its inclusion rather than political and economic incorporation. It is within this vacuum that the Refah emerged as the East’s champion.

Lastly, for all the strength and apparent resilience of the system, Turkey’s political culture does not appear to have come into terms with some of democracy’s more delicate and complex questions. The non-diffusion of elite values among the masses, mentioned above, is one such obstacle. But an even bigger dilemma appears to be the military, which in the past—in 1960, 1971, and again in 1980—has entrusted itself with the mission of saving the Republic from impending collapse. Although for relatively brief interludes (compared especially to South America), the Turkish military’s interventions in politics have shown a general inability on the part of the system, in the past at least, to find a workable, democratic medium for itself. Intense rivalry and bickering at the highest levels of the political system, as was the case between President Demirel and former Prime Minister Çiller and Çiller and Yılmaz,\textsuperscript{41} has been an endemic feature of Turkish politics and did, in fact, bring the country’s political

\textsuperscript{35} Ergun Özbudun, ‘Turkey: Crisis, Interruptions, and Reequilibrium’ in Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset (eds) \textit{Politics In Developing Countries: Comparing Experiences with Democracy} (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1990), p. 209.
\textsuperscript{36} Milliyet, 12 May 1994, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{37} See, for example, \textit{The Turkish Daily News}, 6 June 1994, p. 1. The collapse of PM Çiller’s government in October 1995 and its eventual replacement by an RP-led coalition was largely the result of in-fighting within Çiller’s fragile coalition, especially between the prime minister and her main coalition partner Mesut Yılmaz, leader of the ANAP.
\textsuperscript{38} For an accessible and concise account of Turkey’s domestic geopolitics see, Robert Held, \textit{Middle East Patterns: Places, Peoples, and Politics} (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1989), chapter 21.
\textsuperscript{39} An important example of such a policy is the massive development project known as the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP), designed to provide irrigation systems and electricity to the southeastern cities of Diyarbakir, Gazi Anıtep, Sanli Urfıa, Adiyaman, Mardin, Siirt, Batman, and Sirnak.
\textsuperscript{40} See Philip Robins. ‘The Overlord State: Turkish Policy and the Kurdish Issue’, \textit{Journal of International Affairs}, Vol. 69, No. 4, October 1993, pp. 657–676.
\textsuperscript{41} See, for example, \textit{The Turkish Daily News}, 7 June 1994, p. 1.
machinery to a virtual halt in the late 1950s and again in the late 1970s. The elite’s inability to develop and abide by a truly democratic political culture, one marked by a social spirit of compromise and accommodation, is once again certain to push the political system to the verge of paralysis and give rise to self-ascribed saviours, be they in military uniform or armed with absolutist, even religious, solutions. Although largely unsubstantiated, there have in fact been intermittent reports by Turkish newspapers about possible rumors of a military coup by elements within the armed forces. As one of the country’s leading newspapers put it in an editorial entitled ‘Democracy’s Suicide’, ‘Turkey is rapidly moving toward a yearning for authority that goes beyond military coups, a yearning not for a military coup as an alternative to democracy but for an authority that goes beyond it.’ To the disenchanted voters in March 1994 and December 1995, the Refah appeared as the most likely party capable of averting potential disaster.

Much of this appearance arose from the Refah Party’s deliberately vague, populist platform that made it appear as if it provided a better (or at least different) alternative to ‘politics as usual’ and at the same time symbolized a political movement that was in tune with (and concerned about) the social and cultural currents gripping the nation. Especially since the 1980s, Turkey has been experiencing profound social and economic transformations, thus throwing into confusion and often politicizing such otherwise non-political issues as cultural authenticity and questions of national identity. The Refah’s conservative, religiously-flavored social stance was perfectly suited to benefit from such an environment. At a time of seemingly perpetual cultural turmoil in Turkey, the Refah Party’s ideology and platform were increasingly perceived by large segments of the public as sources of political stability and cultural authenticity. While the militant secularism of Kemalism has been out of vogue since the 1960s, few of Turkey’s contemporary political figures have been willing, publicly at least, to take stands on such controversial matters as spiritualism, moral values, and blind imitation of the West. For its part, most people viewed Turgut Özal’s public religiosity as a normal show of political astuteness rather than the convictions of a pious man. All of a sudden, the Refah Party’s value-laden platform, which only a few years ago seemed anachronistic and out of place, appeared to have found a definite and necessary place in Turkish politics. It is small wonder that the Refah’s message was most enthusiastically embraced in the east, where disillusionment with the political center tends to be the highest. This came at a time of growing neglect of the east by the more established parties and their general failure to live up to their campaign slogans.

42 The 1970s saw intense rivalry between Demirel and Bülent Ecevit, also a perennial political activist. Ecevit was first elected to the parliament in 1961 as a CHP (Republican Popular Party) candidate, and in 1974 became Turkey’s president for a brief period. He regained the presidency during the turbulent years of 1977 to 1979. In 1984, he founded the centre-right Democratic Left Party (DSP), which he currently heads.
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and promises. The Refah’s electoral successes were, in fact, greatly facilitated by the paralysis and failure of its principal competitors, especially the many ruling centrist coalitions.

_The Failed Alternatives_

In almost all of the civilian-led governments of Turkey, centrist parties have monopolized such coveted offices as the presidency, the premiership, and significant parliamentary blocs.\(^46\) Four parties in this category stand out:

– the centre-right True Path Party (DYP), led by former Prime Minister Tansu Çiller;
– the Motherland Party (ANAP), also centre-right, formerly led by the late Özal;
– the Democratic Left Party (DSP), another centre-right party which Bülent Ecevit founded in 1984 and currently heads; and,
– the centre-left Republican People’s Party (CHP).\(^47\)

Far from proving beneficial, the centre’s consistent hold on power has helped erode both its popular legitimacy and its ability to govern effectively. There are two general reasons for this irony. On the one hand, the rotation of the same group of politicians in and out of office, frequently changing party allegiances or forming their own parties, is often seen as a game through which politicians pursue vanity and self-aggrandizement rather than the nation’s best interests. The not-so-subtle accumulation of wealth by Turgut Özal and his immediate family, especially his wife Semra, has done much to bruise the image of most Turkish politicians in the popular eye.\(^48\) Former Prime Minister Çiller, whose reported autocratic style made her a convenient target for attacks by other politicians as well as by the Turkish press, was constantly having to defend herself against allegations of corruption and favoritism.\(^49\) In June 1996, after only three months in office, charges of corruption brought down the ANAP/DYP coalition that had replaced Çiller, in turn prompting the DYP to join an RP-led coalition headed by Erbakan. Thus ‘politics as usual’ is not generally viewed as something to which most self-respecting Turks aspire. ‘Whores,’ claimed a newspaper edi-


\(^{47}\) Newly Turkey’s leftist parties, none of which are represented in the parliament (due to their limited appeal among the electorate), include the Workers Party (IP), the Socialist Union Party (SBP), the Democracy Party (DeP), the Socialist Party of Turkey (STP), the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SDP), and the illegal United Communist Party of Turkey (TBKP).

\(^{48}\) See, for example, an interview with Semra Özal in, _The Turkish Daily News_, 1 June 1994, p. B1.

\(^{49}\) See, for example, Tayyar Safak, ‘The American Finger’, _Yeni Gunaydin_, 22 October 1995, p. 3, in which Çiller is accused of being an American puppet. See also, _The Turkish Daily News_, May 30, 1994, p. 1.
torial in a not-too-subtle reference to Çiller, ‘become the crown pieces of the political glossary. Turkey is embarrassed overseas. Petty calculations deal another stab to democracy.’

Voter dissatisfaction has, as a result, been rampant. In a poll whose results were released in October 1994, some 69% of respondents agreed that ‘the state in Turkey has not fulfilled its responsibilities towards the citizens.’ 76.9% agreed that with the statement the ‘state apparatus has become a toy in the hands of politicians’. In another poll taken a month earlier, only 20.2% of respondents expressed trust in the country’s politicians, and, paradoxically, only 1% trusted the political parties in which the politicians were members. The same poll found that the most trusted institution in the country was the army, getting the vote of a full 26% of the respondents. An astounding 59.9% of respondents said they expected ‘things will get worse’. The results of a March 1996 poll were equally alarming: of 2,722 respondents in 10 provinces, 64% maintained that there was no democracy in Turkey, 69% did not consider the country’s political parties to be democratic, 57% did not think they could criticize the government, and 56% viewed the Turkish judicial system as unjust.

The diminishing confidence of the public in the political process and in the country’s ruling centrist coalitions has directly translated into their voting preferences. Between late March 1994 (when municipal elections were held) and the public opinion poll in the following September, ruling coalition partners lost ground whereas centre-right parties (e.g. the Democratic Left Party) and the Refah—which is considered to be far right of the centre—gained votes. The Refah’s gains were especially impressive in southeastern Turkey, where its strength was estimated at nearly 30% (compared to the Motherland Party’s [ANAP] distant second of only 17%), and in western Turkey it came in a close second with 22.9% as compared to ANAP’s 23.6%.

The Refah Party

The Refah Party is not a new player in Turkish politics and has been around in various guises and under different names since the late 1960s. It began, in fact, as the National Order Party in 1969 and in 1973 changed its name to the National Salvation Party (NSP), during which time, from 1974 to the end of 1977, it took part in all ruling coalitions, first as the partner to the Social Democrats and then the right-wing National Front governments. The Refah itself came into being in 1983, when the ban that the military had imposed on all political activities in 1980 was lifted and political parties were once again

52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
55 Hurriyet, 13 October 1994, p. 18.
56 Hurriyet, 12 October 1994, p. 19.
allowed to openly recruit members and participate in the political process. The actual experience of some of the party’s main figures, the most notable of whom are its leader and perennial religious activist Necmettin Erbakan and its secretary general Oguzhan Asilturk, dates back to the days of the National Order Party in the early 1970s. In the highly volatile and unstable climate of the 1970s, the NSP had found much appeal and support among members of the civil service, a support that in the newly-charged atmosphere of the 1990s is once again proving to be a great asset. The NSP had come as close to adopting an Islamic platform as the 1961 constitution and the political climate of the 1970s allowed. But neither the NSP nor the Refah Party in its early years made any significant headway among the Turkish electorate. Throughout the 1970s and the early-to-mid-1980s, it was not Islam but rather social democracy that attracted increasing numbers of Turkish youth and intellectuals, in turn evoking sharp reactions from the far right. For its part, the Refah’s first electoral showing in the general elections of 1987 was disastrous (only 7.1%), with the party failing to secure any representation in the Assembly. The party’s fortunes had changed by the 1991 elections, however, during which it won 62 of the parliament’s 450 seats. That percentage had increased even further by late 1995 (to 21.5%), giving the RP the largest single bloc of representatives in the parliament.

In addition to the contextual opportunities presented by Turkey’s pseudo-democratic political system, four specific reasons underlined the Refah Party’s steady rise in stature and power. They included the RP’s highly populist agendas; its concerted efforts to tap into previously ignored electoral sources (e.g. the southeast region, the army, etc.); its internal cohesion and organizational strengths, especially when compared to the widespread lack of discipline in most of the other parties; and its grass-roots efforts and general posture as a ‘movement’ rather than a political party. All of these factors combined to give the RP a distinct identity and an electoral niche in a political landscape inundated with parties without compelling ideological identities of their own.

One of the most important reasons for the increasing popularity of the Refah Party was the vaguely articulated but highly populist agenda that informs the party’s platform and the enunciations of its various ‘theorists’. The cornerstone of this platform is what the party calls the ‘Just Order’ (Adil Düzen). The Just Order was the brainchild of Erbakan, the party’s leader, and Süleyman Karaguğle, a former collaborator who later severed his ties with Erbakan and the RP.

57 In fact, Asilturk, the RP’s current secretary general, claims to hold a world record as the longest serving secretary general of any party in the world, having first ascended to his position in 1972. See Turkish Daily News, 23 November 1994, p. B1.
58 In the 1970s, both the National Salvation Party (NSP) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) were alleged to use their participation in the government to place supporters in the bureaucracy. 59 Feroz Ahmad, ‘Politics and Islam in Modern Turkey’, Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 27, No. 1, 2 January 1991, p. 17.
60 The December 1995 election results for the major political parties were as follows: Refah Party 21.5%; Motherland Party 19.5%; True Path Party 19%; Democratic Left Party 14.5%; Republican People’s Party 11%. Combined, the smaller parties gained 14.5% of the vote. FBIS:WEU, 26 December 1995, p. 19.
Earlier, in 1991, Erbakan had published a book entitled *The Just Economic Order (Adil Ekonomik Duzen)*, in which he had outlined some of his ‘miraculous prescriptions’ for Turkey’s economic malaise. Although it was meant as a guiding ideological prism, most of the premises of the Just Order concentrate on economic matters. RP members, therefore, often tried to present more specific propositions concerning both the development of the southeast and to foreign relations. Before examining some of these foreign policy and regional propositions, it is useful to examine a few of the core principals of the Just Order in greater detail.

**The Just Order**

The Just Order was made-up of a total of thirty-one articles, some of which dealt with socio-cultural and theoretical issues but most of which revolved around economic matters. The bulk of these economic premises are very vague, often contradict each other, and are impractical in practice. For example, the economic universe which the Just Order envisioned is one under the complete control of market forces. In fact, article 1 explicitly states that ‘in the Just Order, the state does not engage in any economic activities. The private sector runs the economy.’ All the state needs to do is to prevent monopolies. This is believed to:

- foster rapid development, as there will be no interests on loans, and the money diverted to interests go toward investments instead (loans will be provided by the wealthy to ‘trustworthy entrepreneurs’);
- prevent unemployment, in fact tripling the work force from its current 10 million to an estimated 30 million workers;
- result in an explosion of exports, as production will rise by ‘fivetofold to sixfold’ and so will capabilities to export;
- lower the country’s foreign debt, because of the increased wealth of the nation and the capable management of Just Order ‘cadre’; and,
- eliminate inflation, although there might be ‘small increases and drops in prices associated with changes in supply and demand’;

The Just Order is not to be confused with capitalism, as capitalism is said to have ‘five microbes’ and cause ‘sixteen diseases’. The microbes include interests, unfair taxes, the mint, the banking system, and the exchange system. The most awful of the diseases, meanwhile, are hunger, poverty, high prices, inflation, the mafia, corruption, moral decay, backwardness, wars, and exploitation. Neither is the Just Order to be misinterpreted as communism, which ‘could not bring happiness to humanity’ and ‘went bankrupt after 70 years of

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63 All of the information on the Just Order contained in this section comes from the English translation of a 43-page booklet published in Turkish by the Refah Party (with no name of author or date and place of publication) under the title Adil Duzen as printed in FBIS: WEU, ‘Turkey: Welfare Party Explains its “Just Order” ’, 5 December 1995, pp. 1–15.
torture'. Both communism and capitalism are ‘twin brothers who are identical to each other in their roots.’ Both are systems of ‘oppressors’ and ‘oppressed.’ The only difference between them is that the oppressor force is ‘political power’ in communism and ‘capital power’ in capitalism. Capitalism is bound to go bankrupt just as communism has. The Just Order is ‘an order of harmony not discord’ and one in which there is a congruence of interests between workers and employers, government administrators and the people, doctors and patients, and lawyers and clients.

Other Aspects of RP Platform

Besides emphasis on economic issues, there are numerous other populist declarations and initiatives undertaken by the Refah Party on a regular basis, many of which at times directly contradicted the premises of the Just Order. Erbakan, for example, was reported to have promised the distribution of inexpensive bread, meat, fruit, vegetables, and coal to low-income families in municipalities with RP mayors. He also supported the rights of striking civil servants to demand higher wages and has called for the circulation of an Islamic currency (the Islamic dinar) in place of the proposed single European currency. The RP, however, paid particular attention to foreign relations and to the development of Turkey’s southeast region, the latter because of the anxiety the party’s political ascent has created in both foreign as well as domestic circles and the latter because of the significance of the area to its electoral strategy.

In the foreign policy realm, Refah’s platform was based on classic dependency theory arguments, the main premises of which remain highly popular among average citizens in the Third World. The West, the RP maintained, has developed by underdeveloping the Islamic world in general and Turkey in particular. As one party ideologue put it:

In the forties, we were making weapons. In the fifties, the Marshall plan destroyed our military industries. Without the Marshall plan we would be making our own weapons. They (the West) destroyed our ability to work.

In a 1993 speech before the RP’s fourth Grand Convention, Erbakan claimed that the other political parties ‘have been dancing to a tune played by someone else,’ namely the United States. The Turkish state is nothing but an ‘imitator regime,’ he decried, which is more eager to serve the interests of the Europeans and the United States than that of Turkey or any of the other Muslim countries. This is most evident in Azerbaijan and especially in the Balkans:

The real objective of the West is to exterminate the Muslims in Bosnia. Even though this

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67 Quoted in FBIS: WEU, 10 May 1994, p. 73.
68 FBIS: WEU, 5 December 1995, p. 28.
truth is well known, the imitator regimes in Turkey have tried to assign the responsibility for a solution of the problem to organizations like the UN, CSCE, and NATO.69

The remedy was to pursue foreign policies that were more genuinely nationalistic and involved greater solidarity with other Islamic countries. As a result, the RP consistently came out against Turkey’s application for membership to the European Union, a position which according to one public opinion poll was supported by roughly 40% of the Turkish population.70 The European Union’s constant rebuffing of Turkey’s application only added to the popularity of the Refah’s stance.71

The Refah Party put forward five specific foreign policy goals which it maintained would put an end to ‘the exploitation of the Islamic countries’. They included: the establishment of a United Nation of the Islamic countries, which would serve as a forum for the resolution of potential problems between various Muslim states; the establishment of an Islamic common market; the introduction of a common Islamic currency; a joint Islamic defence force; and, the establishment by the Islamic countries of a cultural cooperation organization.72 Refah officials agreed that these were distant objectives, but they pointed to the seeming unattainability of European integration a mere few decades ago. Once in place, these projects would effectively end the subservience of Turkey and other Muslim nations to the West. As one RP official put it in an interview:

When compared with the West, the Islamic nations are far behind today in income and living standards. But we represent a great potential. A human potential of 1.5 billion souls. We can increase current living standards ten times or even one hundred-fold if we can come together and work for our own market. This is not enmity towards the West. We don’t hate anyone. It’s just that that’s what we want to do.73

And, according to another party official:

The same as the West unites to serve its interests, the Islamic nation should unite for its own good. This is both logical and the reasonable thing to do. This will save us not only in this world, but also in the one to come.74

The Refah’s position concerning the country’s southeast region was far less clear and articulate, although various party activists did spend a considerable amount of effort and energy at courting the region’s vote. The party’s ideological ambivalence toward the southeast appeared to have been deliberate: on the one hand, the region provides a largely untapped gold mine of electoral resources; on the other hand, the RP simply could not afford to even appear sympathetic to the

69 FBIS: WEU, 5 December 1995, p. 28. In an interview with the Lebanese magazine Al-Diyar, another RP official voiced similar sentiments, claiming that ‘the West has brought us to this juncture. Every infant draws his first breath in this country with 50 million Turkish liras of debts to the West … The West is always working against the Islamic world through NATO, the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and other international forums.’ Quoted in FBIS: WEU, 10 May 1994, p. 73.
71 Semih Idiz, ‘Refah’s Foreign Policy Outlook’, Turkish Probe, 1 April 1994, p. 7.
73 Ibid.
74 FBIS: WEU, 10 May 1994, p. 74.

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cause of Kurdish separatism. In fact, there were reports of serious dissention within the RP over the Kurdish question as the party tried to tread the fine line between criticizing the government’s military operations in the southeast and not endorsing the PKK’s campaigns of violence against official and nonofficial targets.\footnote{\textit{Aydinlik}, 19 August 1995, p. 8.} Therefore, the issues on which the RP often sought to focus dealt with the region’s economic and industrial underdevelopment. Various RP officials, Erbakan especially, often stressed the need to help develop the southeast and frequently accused Ankara’s ‘imitators of the West’ of not doing enough for the region.\footnote{\textit{FBIS: WEU}, 6 September 1995, p. 29.} Politically, nevertheless, RP leaders frequently criticized the government’s harsh treatment of Kurdish activists, although they were reluctant to outline their own specific political programs and solutions for the region once in power. In very general terms, the party maintained that the state of emergency in effect in the region needed to have been lifted immediately and military personnel replaced by religious and civilian authorities; the security personnel assigned to the region should not have looked down on the local population; foreign personnel should have been removed from the region and Western military operations (Operations Provide Comfort and Poised Hammer) terminated; and, the region’s displaced villagers and migrant families should have been compensated and looked after.\footnote{\textit{Turkish Daily News}, 25 August 1994, p. 8.}

Underlying all of these propositions, of course, were implicit and explicit reference to Islam. Although the Just Order and the party’s other ideological expositions did not specifically refer to religion, Islam did provide the overall theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the RP’s platform and agendas. But the RP’s relationship with Islam was somewhat complicated by the party’s deliberately vague incorporation of religion into its ideology. The Refah’s popular image as an ‘Islamic’ party was due more to the history, activities, and enunciations of its main activists—chief among whom is Erbakan—rather than its adherence to the theoretical works of a synthesizer of Islam and politics (like Iran’s Ali Shariati). For the most part, the Refah was a party with highly energetic activists but remarkably few ideologues. For the Refah’s members and its supporters, Islam was not so much of 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.\footnote{\textit{Milliyet}, 10 April 1994, p. 23.} Most members of the RP, in fact, seemed not only to have accepted and internalized the separation of politics from religion but to have gone further and given primacy to the winning of political power over pursuing regions goals.\footnote{Ibid.} As a result, within the RP most members were said to keep their religious beliefs private and to themselves.\footnote{Ibid.} To other RP members and sympathizers, a new recruit was simply seen as someone who was once troubled by Turkey’s many, contradictory identities—Turk,
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European, Middle Eastern, secular, Muslim—and who had chosen to adopt a loosely Islamic identity. Herein lay one of the main keys to the Refah Party’s great success at attracting disenchanted, young voters, especially from Anatolia.

RP Recruitments

The populist platforms of the Refah Party significantly strengthened its electoral base among the lower strata of society and in the eastern and southeastern regions of Turkey. For a period of a few years in the early 1990s, the RP was practically the only political party that actively tried to get recruits in the cities and towns east of Ankara. Previously, most elected officials came from well-known local families who had declared their allegiance to one of the many centrist political parties, counting not so much on their party’s platform but on their personal prestige and name recognition to get elected. By opening up branch offices and fielding local candidates, and by having Istanbul-and Ankara-based political figures with national renown (Erbakan and Asilturk) frequently visit cities in the region, the Refah had begun to change both the practice of politics and the political landscape of eastern Anatolia.81 Within this context, the Refah’s mere active presence in the region and the rhetoric of its leaders regarding economic neglect and human rights violations by the government were tantamount to a major recruiting effort.

Besides the southeast, the RP made a concerted effort at recruiting students, both at the high school and university levels, and, more significantly, from within the ranks of the armed forces. After the 1994 municipal elections, the party began pursuing a calculated strategy of cultivating closer ties with the army. Since the Turkish armed forces have been the bulwark of secularism and one of the most important mainstays of Kemalism in Turkey—perhaps the most important—their relations with the Refah were precarious and uneasy at best.82 An example of the tension between the RP and the military occurred in March 1996, when it was revealed that in the previous month the Interior Ministry had sought to restrict religious worship in the nation’s Gendarmerie units.83 After a brief but intense barrage of accusations and counter-accusations between some RP officials and ‘unnamed military officers’, Erbakan sent a ‘peace delegation’ to the Ministries of National Defense and Foreign Affairs in an effort to end the dispute.84 He was also reported to have ordered his deputies to ‘avoid polemics’

81 Nevertheless, some of the RP’s deputies from the eastern cities of Van and Sanliurfa in addition to Ankara mayor Melih Gokcek have been reported to differ sharply with Erbakan on the Kurdish issue and to criticize his lack of more efforts for the region. see Aydinkik, 19 August 1991, p. 8.
82 For a review of some of the tensions between the RP and the Turkish military see, Cumhuriyet, 31 March 1996, p. 3.
83 In a memorandum dated 15 February 1996, the Interior Ministry was said to have ordered Gendarmerie units to remove from their premises the minarets that were constructed out of discarded barrels welded together, and, additionally, prohibited them from having prayers read through loudspeakers. See Turkiye, 24 March 1996, p. 15.
84 Hurriyet, 28 March 1996, p. 23.

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against the armed forces. Nevertheless, speculations that the armed forces would not tolerate a Refah-led government continued to persist.

In seeking to reverse this situation, party figures were vocal in their declarations of fraternal ties with the army. As one RP parliamentarian put it:

‘Our army is the people’s army,’ another RP official was widely quoted as having said ‘... It is an organization that is the apple of the nation’s eye.’ As it turned out, these efforts did not have their desired effects. Nevertheless, 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. In 1995, following a practice frequently used by other parties, the RP invited a number of prominent and respected retired and active-duty army officers to run as its candidates. Three former generals and four colonels were placed on the RP’s electoral list in a deliberate attempt to allay the army’s suspicions of the party. Ultimately, as it turned out, these manoeuvres did not go far enough in placating the military’s apprehensions toward the Refah. Amid heightened tensions with the military and rumours of an impending coup by Kemalist generals, Erbakan resigned from the prime minister’s office on June 18, 1997.

Another potentially powerful recruitment base that the Refah Party tried to exploit was among the country’s burgeoning student body. This is despite the fact that the Turkish constitutions did not allow for university or high school students to become members of political parties. Nonetheless, according to published reports, the RP embarked on a massive recruiting campaign in the country’s campuses (Table 1). The RP was reported to have an estimated total of 127,000 student members in Koranic, middle, and high schools and was said to be planning on raising that number to 200,000. Another 23,000 RP members were believed to be among the ‘working youth’, a number the party planned to increase to more than 483,000. This did not include another 16,000 members ‘in dormitories’ and 12,000 ‘young athletes’. The total membership of the RP among school- and university-age individuals was estimated at 219,000, with a target figure of 821,000. The accuracy of these numbers, of course, cannot be

85 Ibid. For a detailed account of the RP’s overtures to the military following this incident see, Turkish Daily News, 5 April 1996, pp. 1, 3.
87 Yeni Gunaydin, 1 August 1995, p. 8.
88 Turkish Daily News, 5 April 1996, p. 3.
89 Yeni Gunaydin, 1 August 1995, p. 8. For Erbakan’s overtures to the army after becoming the prime minister, pledging to work ‘hand in hand, day and night, with our heroic Army.’ Quoted in The Christian Science Monitor, October 18, 1996, p. 7.
90 Hurriyet, 7 June 1995, p. 37.
91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
Table 1. Reported number of RP members and ‘representatives’ at different educational levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Current RP members</th>
<th>Target RP members</th>
<th>Current RP representatives</th>
<th>Target RP representatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Koranic schools</td>
<td>11,799</td>
<td>55,949</td>
<td>1,548</td>
<td>5,231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>middle &amp; high schools</td>
<td>116,000</td>
<td>200,000</td>
<td>6,133</td>
<td>42,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>universities</td>
<td>49,398*</td>
<td>64,000</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Combined number of both members and representatives.

Source: Hurriyet, 7 June 1995, p. 37.

verified and there are bound to be inaccuracies in the unsubstantiated reports from which they come. Nevertheless, they do serve to illustrate the RP’s serious commitment to expanding its electoral and support base among the young. Even if the RP did not succeed in attracting actual student members, it did have considerable success in gaining sympathizers and passive supporters in high school and university campuses, especially in towns and cities east of Ankara.

The Refah Party claims that women play an important role within the party.93 Female participation seems to have been limited, however, to recruiting and voter mobilization campaigns as women are conspicuously absent from the party’s higher echelons. In the municipal elections of 1994, for example, the party did not field any female candidates.94 Besides taking part in rallies and marches, Refah women, most of whom tended to be in their twenties and early to mid-thirties, often went from door to door to get potential votes for the party (more of which below). Nevertheless, according to the Chairperson of the RP’s Istanbul Women’s Committee:

women are at the center of active politics. It will be the (RP) women who will decide whether or not to assume office … on the condition that our delegates make such a request and our administrators view it positively. This is a matter of historical process, which will finally be decided upon by (RP) women.95

Internal Cohesion

The Refah Party’s rapid political ascent in recent years might be due to its populist platforms and aggressive recruitment campaigns. But it was also greatly reinforced by the Party’s own somewhat unique internal discipline and impressive organizational strengths. Among Turkey’s many political parties, the Refah

93 According to an enthusiastic female member of the Refah, ‘we at the RP have the biggest and best organized women’s political group in Turkey’. She also claimed that the party had as many as 300,000 female members in Istanbul alone, although that figure appears to have been a gross exaggeration. See, Turkish Daily News, 15 December 1996, p. 3.
95 Ibid.
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Figure 1. The Refah Party’s regional hierarchy.

was unique in that it was not characterized by the frequent resignations and challenges to leadership and ideology that became endemic features of most of the other parties. Internal dissent became a regular feature of former Prime Minister Çiller’s True Path Party, for example, so much so that ten of the Party’s own parliament deputies did not vote for her when she faced a vote of no confidence in October, 1995. It is not uncommon for sitting deputies to resign from their party—at one point in the autumn of 1994 the Turkish parliament had as many as 24 independent deputies, many of whom had resigned from their party after having been elected to office—or to form completely new parties of their own. Once again, the Refah stood out as a party with uncharacteristic cohesion and unity. As the Refah’s deputy mayor of Beyoğlu (an Istanbul municipality) boasted in a 1994 interview with Italy’s *L’Espresso*:

Our party … is based on two fundamental principles—great ideological strength and very great discipline … Discipline means absolute obedience to our leader, Necemetin Erbakan.

The administrative organization of the Refah Party was highly evolved and was designed to reach into even the most basic local level of every neighborhood, namely the apartment building (figure 1). Although more of a goal than a reality, this detailed organization set-up demonstrates the importance which the RP attached to having a presence at the local, neighbourhood level in as many parliamentary districts as possible. Every neighbourhood had an official assigned to it, who in turn supervised three other officials with the responsibilities of

98 *FBIS: WEU*, 27 September 1994, p. 44.
looking after the party’s interests in either avenues, streets, or apartment buildings. The neighbourhood official reported to an inspector, who in turn reported to a district chairman. Finally, the district chairman reported to a provincial party council, made-up of 50 regular members and 50 reserves. This set-up was replicated at the national level. Although the RP did not officially segregate its members, there were separate ‘ladies committees’ in each unit at every level.

Apart from the RP’s official, organizational hierarchy, there were two other, implicit and unofficial divisions that differentiated between the various members of the party. One was generational and the other regional. Generally, party cadres fell into one of three categories. At the top were the ‘founding big brothers’, men of considerable experience, in their sixties and seventies, who were the primary administrators of the party and from among whom many of the party’s parliamentarians were drawn. Besides their political activities, most were successful engineers and academicians, thus enjoying considerable social stature and prestige in their local communities. In the December 1995 national elections, some 21 of Refah’s candidates came from the academics specializing in economics, engineering, and Islamic sciences. These prominent figures often appeared inaccessible and legendary to the third category, the rank-and-file, with whom the second, middle echelon came into regular contact. The second echelon was mostly made up of men in their thirties and forties, often serving as administrators in provincial organizations and local authorities. Most came from such middle-class backgrounds as government employees, teachers, and university lecturers. They served as a moderating force against the more doctrinaire and often more radical members of the third echelon, comprising the party’s grass-roots activists and supporters who were in their late teens to their late twenties and early thirties. Most members of this group tended to be current or former students whose education or diplomas had not brought them jobs commensurate with their qualifications. Also among this group, most of whom were drawn to religion during the Islamic wave that swept across the Middle East in the 1980s, were young workers and men and women in the lower middle classes.

Subtle regional differences could also be found among RP members. These differences largely mirrored the various regional preferences and idiosyncracies that are found in the different parts of the country. Party members from central Anatolia tended to be more provincial and conservative, both in terms of their religious beliefs and in their greater degree of nationalistic fervour. Those from the Black Sea region tended to be more cosmopolitan in their outlook but also more willing to mix religion and politics. In the southeast, Kurdish identity,
mixed with religion, became more prominent, reflected in turn in a growing number of RP members from the region. Finally, party members from the bigger cities of Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir may have any of these characteristics. It is interesting to note that the Refah was not able to gain a significant foothold in the coastal strips of the Aegean, the Mediterranean, and the western Black Sea. Part of the explanation for this could be the high concentration of wealth in such coastal cities as Izmir and Antalya at the hands of the Istanbul- or Ankara-based elites.

**Grassroots Populism**

A final factor that resulted in the swelling of the ranks of RP voters was the party’s zealous efforts at attracting and mobilizing supporters at the grass-roots level, something which few of the other parties had done in the past. Three different yet inter-related factors served to strengthen the popularity of the party at the local, grass-roots level. They included Erbakan’s charisma and his personal standing in the eyes of the RP’s constituency and supporters; the party officials’ aggressive efforts at ensuring that their supporters voted for them; and various other attempts, some through official campaigns some more haphazardly, that the party undertook to enhance its image and standing among the public.

Not unlike other Middle Eastern countries, contemporary Turkish political history has been marked by a strong personalist tradition that can be traced back all the way to Atatürk. Some of the more notable of such personalist figures have included İsmet İnönü (military hero, prime minister, and the republic’s second president), Adnan Menderes (prime minister from 1950 to 1960), Bülent Ecevit (president and one of the most important figures of the 1970s), Süleyman Demirel, Turgut Özal, and Alparslan Türkes. Erbakan’s persona and his political career fitted into this pattern perfectly and greatly accounted for his longevity and resilience. There was, nevertheless, one crucial difference which, at least to the eyes of his supporters, separates Erbakan from the mould of the other politicians named here. Although Erbakan was himself a career politician, long involved in, and a member of, the political status quo, he succeeded in separating himself from the rest of the body politic and in presenting the image of an outsider—in fact, that of a newcomer. In fact, as noted earlier, most of today’s political figures enjoy generally low levels of public trust and confidence. To the growing number of lower- and lower-middle class and Anatolian Turks, however, Erbakan was seen as different. Despite his long history of involvement with the political establishment, Erbakan’s image appeared to be untarnished and his past credentials seemed to have helped rather

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106 Ibid.
109 Türkes has been one, of Turkey’s perennial right-wing political figures, often described by the Turkish press as ‘fascist’ and ‘dangerous’. He was one of the leaders of the 1960 coup and currently leads the ultranationalist National Action Party—MHP.
than hurt his popularity. Most members of the party, in fact, referred to him as either ‘Hodja’ (a respectful term reserved for teachers and scholars) or ‘Mujahid’ (crusader). The reasons for this paradox had more to do with the general psychological dispositions of the RP’s electorate rather than Erbakan’s own qualifications. For once in a long time, someone was speaking with rather than at them, and doing so in a common and populist language they could understand and relate to. To the RP’s electorate and support base, Erbakan was far different from Ankara’s other, stuffy politicians, not afraid of travelling to eastern cities like Erzurum or Diyarbakir and giving speeches in public squares. Erbakan’s charismatic and populist manner, especially when delivering speeches, elicited special interest from most of his audiences. In a field full of tired or stoic politicians such as Demirel and Çiller, Erbakan’s ability to relate to the crowd and to appear as one of them made him stand out as not only different but in fact warm and trustworthy. In a speech to thousands of supporters in the largely Kurdish city of Van in the southeast, for example, he was loudly cheered when he addressed the audience as the ‘descendants of Saladin’.

A second facet of the Refah Party’s grass-roots efforts was its members’ refusal to take even one vote for granted. In fact, as one report put it, the RP ‘gets ready for another election as if it is going to be held the next day’. Once again, the party’s electoral strategy reached into the most grass-roots level possible. The regional, hierarchical organization outlined above was replicated for ballot boxes. The party’s neighbourhood officials appointed committees of at least three people for every ballot box in their area. The committee members were responsible for collecting information about all the voters registered to that ballot box; briefing the party’s propagandists on these voters when necessary; and, most importantly, they were to do whatever they could to ensure that potential RP voters went to the ballot box.

This voter mobilization campaign served the Refah extremely well in the last two elections, especially when compared with the lackluster efforts of most other parties at the local level, most of whom prefer to rely on the electronic and printed media to communicate with the electorate and to get their message out.

Finally, there were a number of other populist initiatives undertaken by the Refah that served to further cement its ties with various local communities. This was in addition to the party’s launching of its own radio and TV stations (Marmara FM and Channel 7 respectively). The most controversial of such initiatives involved the sale of bread by RP-held municipalities at bargain prices (TL 3,000 instead of TL 6,000). Most of the RP’s efforts in this direction were directly aimed at benefiting the underclasses: the distribution of food during Ramazan and fuel in winter, conducting collective circumcision for children of the needy, and establishing ‘marriage waqf’ for the young. There had been

110 Milliyet, 10 April 1994, p. 23.
112 Milliyet, 10 April 1994, p. 23.
113 Ibid.
114 Milliyet, 13 September 1994, p. 4.
other similar initiatives by the energetic mayors of Istanbul and Ankara, whom the Refah considered to be its ‘shining stars’.\textsuperscript{116} Besides the sale of bread at lower prices, Istanbul’s mayor also promised to shut down the city’s brothels.\textsuperscript{117} Imitating a strategy first implemented by ANAP municipalities from 1984 to 1989, the RP’s corp of mayors were also expected to launch a number of mega projects—in the words of Ankara’s mayor ‘ultra mega’—to be paid for largely by the private sector. Such projects were likely to include electrification of remote villages and the construction of low-income housing, paved roads, schools, and hospitals. Not all of the RP’s populist efforts had an economic premise, however. There was also emphasis on moral and ethical behavior. All RP members were encouraged to act politely in public, and, more importantly, to use the more conservative forms of greetings in their daily conducts (selam aleykum instead of the more common gunaydin).\textsuperscript{118} Although the actual effectiveness of these and other populist efforts by the RP could not be quantified and measured, they significantly deepened the party’s support base and enhanced the loyalty of its sympathetic voters.

Conclusion
As Turkey’s last two major elections have shown the Refah Party had become a formidable force in Turkish politics before it was banned in January 1998. Three general factors have been identified as the major reasons for the party’s surprising rise in electoral strength. The overall nature of the Turkish political system—in which the mechanisms of democracy are not fully buttressed on a well-evolved democratic spirit and political culture—provided the needed space and environment in which a populist political party can operate and gain in electoral strength. Both career politicians and political parties, especially those in and around the centre of the ideological spectrum, have often taken their hold on power and tenure in office for granted, seldom concerned with reaching to the masses and often more interested in political manoeuvres and intra-party politics. Within this institutional context, the Refah succeeded in mobilizing the popular vote and capturing the mayor’s offices in a number of important cities and gaining a slim majority in the Turkish parliament. These successes would not have been possible without the Refah’s own grass-roots efforts and the tired nature of its principal opponents. All of this occurred within a cultural climate that is marked by contradictions, disillusionment, and lack of consensus over the very essence of national identity, made all the more acute by a high rates of

\textsuperscript{117} Turkish Daily News, May 30, 1994, p. 2. Although this issue was first raised more than two years ago now, most of the brothels in Istanbul and in other cities with RP mayors have yet to be closed down. A few have, nevertheless, been shut down and turned into bookstores (featuring general rather than specifically religious books).
inflation and unemployment. This gave added resonance to the party’s largely traditional—but only loosely Islamic—platform.

All of these factors culminated in the creation of a populist party *par excellence*. The Refah’s ideology might have been vaguely articulated, but it was one with which the hitherto politically alienated masses could be identified; its economic promises might have been inflationary if put into practice, but they were the ones the average Turk wants to hear; and its new slate of mayors may be political novices, but it is to them that many of the disenchanted voters from the lower classes look up. It is these very sources of strength that made the Refah so threatening to Turkey’s established political elite and, by extension, to the military. Having become increasingly isolated from the electorate they seek to represent, Turkish political elites both on the right and the left have failed to cultivate a consistent and loyal following among the electorate. The system may be democratic in name, but it has largely failed to give all or even most potential voters a sense of efficacy within the larger political process. Simultaneously, a democratic political culture has not yet developed to complement the ostensibly democratic institutions of state. Within such a pseudo-democratic context, a political party with grass-roots organizing capabilities, an ideology that is far more populist than those of its competitors, and a somewhat unique concern with social and cultural issues is best situated to reap electoral benefits. Turkey’s democracy lacks a meaningful, resonant cultural nexus between state and society. The Refah Party sought to fill the ensuing vacuum; that its own democratic agendas were at best suspect and by no means fully articulated seems to have concerned few of its voters and sympathizers.

The seemingly steady rise in the popularity of the Refah appeared all the more astounding considering the appearance of more than a few blemishes on the party’s own youthful, supposedly puritanical image. For one thing, Erbakan was an old political hand, long part of an establishment which the party tried so hard to distance itself from. Moreover, the utterances and agendas of Istanbul and Ankara mayors did not always sit well with those constituents who considered themselves as more cosmopolitan. There were also persistent rumours that the party was supported by a massive infusion of funds from Iran and Saudi Arabia. Although no evidence has to date been presented to substantiate these rumours, they have not gone away and continue to cast a dark shadow over the legality of RP’s fund-raising and other activities. Finally, there were allegations that RP members were involved in a scandal concerning aid to Bosnia. Yet despite all of these blemishes, the party continued to appear strong to the younger members of the more traditional middle classes, the lower-middle and lower classes, and the economically marginalized elements.

Ironically, the RP’s ascendance to power proved to be a costly kiss of death. With power comes the need to compromise, especially given the RP’s highly

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119 An RP member is alleged to have laundered large sums of money the party collected as donations to Bosnia, allegations denied by the Refah’s top brass. Also, an estimated TL 38 trillion was reported to be in the party’s bank accounts. See *Turkish Daily News*, 23 November 1994, p. B1.
fragile coalition while in power. Erbakan had to play a delicate balancing act while he was in the prime minister’s office. On the one hand, he tried to cater to the RP’s constituents through the pursuit of populist domestic and foreign policies, the most notable of which was a $23 billion agreement with Iran and a highly visible tour of a number of Muslim countries. On the other hand, he tried, unsuccessfully at the end, to placate the worries of the armed forces and Turkey’s other secular politicians. In its convention in October 1996, for example, the RP deliberately down played its religious identity. Instead, in his address to convention delegates, Erbakan called the RP a guarantor of democracy and secularism in Turkey and omitted all references to the Just Order. The RP’s rise to power in 1996 was facilitated by its unique brand of populism. It was ultimately this very populism that was seen as highly threatening to the armed services and led to the removal of the party from office and its eventual banning.