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Turkey

Prosperity? No thanks!

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The Islamic fundamentalist Refah (Prosperity) party came to power in Turkey at the end of 1995, on an anti-Western and populist programme, following the collapse of a conservative coalition government. Once in power Refah has made massive concessions to their neo-liberal backers within the Turkish bourgeoisie, and the military bureaucracy that still controls Turkish politics behind the scenes. Disillusionment, and a series of scandals linking Refah and the other bourgeois parties to the military, the Mafia and the neo-fascist right have rocked the country.

International Viewpoint asked Ufak Uras, president of the Freedom and Solidarity Party (Ozgurluk ve Dayanisma Partisi - ODP), how the left is responding to this unstable situation.

What is the result of the first year of Prosperity Party rule?

The Prosperity Party (Refah partisi) came to power with the tacit support of the army and capital. Their behaviour in power has embarrassed their militants: the Refah government has implemented pro-capital projects for economic restructuring. As a result, Refah has lost its fresh, new image. Nevertheless, the party is different in some respects from the other parties, with its strong rank-and-file base, its network of economic relationships, and the community identity which it has developed.

Refah presents itself as the ideological umbrella protecting all those who are rejected and marginalised by neo-liberalism and privatisations. Meanwhile, they reach for the whip in order to strike discipline into the working class.

The only real ideological challenge to Refah at the moment is from rather marginalised Islamic radicals and intellectuals within the party. The poorer sections of Turkish society have not yet reacted against Refah's anti-social policies. They have not yet realised that Refah can neither transform relations of power at the local level, nor implement any significant transformation of daily life. The party has neither the intellectual capacity nor the force to do so.

The Freedom and Solidarity Party (ODP) links a libertarian, non-confessional perspective with an orientation towards social struggles, particularly the labour struggle, in opposition to political Islam and neo-liberal orthodoxy.

Refah may be a fundamentalist party, but do they follow the same foreign policy as their pro-western predecessors?

As part of the opposition, Refah said relations with the Muslim countries of the middle east were more important than those with the European Union. But once they came to power, Refah declared their allegiance to the traditional foreign policy objectives. Refah didn't even hesitate before implementing a military co-operation agreement with Israel. A decision which alarmed many ordinary members of the party.

The lowest common denominator politics of "we are all Muslims, we can solve all our problems by talking to each other" no longer hides the truth about Refah: they came to power without having done their homework. Their opposition to the West is a cultural opposition, which doesn't question the capitalist system which links us with Europe.

Turkey's relations with the European Union are limited to a customs union. Turkey cannot enter the European Union, but its economic ties, and position in the middle east oblige Europe to take the country into account. But the West European countries have distanced themselves from Turkey over the state of emergency, the human rights issue, democratic problems, and the chronic economic crisis which has caused massive unemployment and a very high rate of inflation.

Is there a possibility of democratic openings?

We try to express the libertarian, democratic alternative. The current ODP slogan is "either they become accountable, or the people will sweep them away!" We seek to nurture, and accelerate, the massive protests which have been developing. To oppose the establishment parties, we need the widest possible union of left forces. The ODP is building its own solidarity networks at a district and provincial level.

Why are Greek-Turkish relations so bad?

The initiative in Greek-Turkish relations has always come from the warmongers on both sides. The previous Ciller government was yet another example of the strategy of political masturbation on the international scene whenever the domestic crisis deepened.

What does the ODP suggest to reduce the tension?

At our own level, we are preparing for a joint conference [of anti-militarist forces] to improve internationalistsolidarity. We hope to work together with AKEL (Greek Cypriot Communists), the Turkish Republican Party of Cyprus, the Greek Communist Party and the Sinasmismons (left). Our contacts with these partners during last year's 29th Congress of the French Communist Party were very encouraging.

What about the Kurdish question?

The state of emergency continues. We still call for a mutual cease-fire and a general amnesty. We recognise the HADEP party as our partner [in the Kurdish regions]. Together we celebrated World Peace Day on 1 September 1996, launching a campaign to gather one million signatures on a petition for peace. We demanded a society where the guns would be at last be silent, where everyone can express themselves, and live as they choose. We realise that the struggle with the parties of war will be difficult. But there is no alternative to the construction of a multi-lingual, libertarian, egalitarian society, which respects a plurality of identities. Despite the challenges, we are gaining ground with these ideas.

How is the ODP developing?

For 16 years in Turkey, fascism, political Islam and neo-liberalism all found a tribune for their ideas. But not the world of labour, socialism and revolutionary thought. Hence the interest which accompanied the foundation of the ODP one year ago. A range of groups recognised the importance of uniting the revolutionary left, socialists, rank-and-file social democrats, feminists, greens, anti-militarists, anarchists and others in a pluralist party, with multiple voices, and a rainbow perspective.

The second important step was to unite the masses. Today, 85% of our 30,000 members were not previously members of left political groups! One million people have responded to our dialogue. In one way or another, we strive to organise about 450,000 people.

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We have three main campaigns: for peace; for democratisation; and for the defence of labour against the New World Order, globalisation and privatisation.

A few months after the ODP was founded, we faced the challenge of local elections in many regions. Despite the risks, we decided to participate in five districts where the right was particularly strong. Unlike all the other parties, the ODP selected its candidates locally, rather than from national headquarters.

We received about 2% of the vote. Given the conditions, this has to be considered a success. Recent polls put our electoral support at about 5%. We will be much better organised during the Autumn 1997 parliamentary elections, where we will campaign with the call for a real force to rebuild. The restructuring of Turkey should be conceived around a solution to the labour crisis.

We are building up our district and provincial organisation, with a layer of experienced members. The party is now present in 62 prefectures, 300 sub-prefectures and 1,000 municipalities. We can hold our head up among the workers-labour parties of the world.

We have to restructure the left too. No more arbitrary behaviour by the leaders! No more hierarchical models, with obedience to orders from above. No to the excessive professionalisation of politics, where decisions are made a hundred levels away from the place they are implemented. Enough of the situation where people don't participate in politics, but consume it, passively!

As ODP President, I support the principle of rotation of party posts. I have kept my job at the University. We have also implemented a 30% minimum quota for women in the leading bodies of the party. And indeed, the number of women and young people represented in the leadership is increasing.

Many people outside the ODP were sceptical when the former Stalinists, Maoists and Trotskyists came together in a new party. People expected to see internal disputes. Instead, there has been active co-operation, as we have prioritised head-to-shoulder work against the system rather than sterile argument.

Our foreign relations are still below the level which our position in the country calls for. Though we shared our experiences with others at last year's Zapatista Conference for Humanity and against Neo-Liberalism. We will do the same later this year at the Sao Paulo Forum.

Inside Turkey, we refuse any temptation to manipulate the trade unions, associations and professional groups where we have a real influence. Similarly, wherever we have an influence in the Turkish immigrant communities of western Europe, we refuse to portray ourselves as speaking in their name and on their behalf. Those who try to use emigrants in this way, in the hope of building a political lobby in Europe are doomed to failure. On the contrary, an honest, just approach should quickly bear fruit. Hundreds of thousands of Turks live in Europe. We encourage them to turn not only towards the ODP, but towards the left groups and mass movements of the countries they live in. This is how we can build solidarity networks against multinationals like Shell, Mobil et Carrefour (supermarkets), who are sacking their Turkish workers, and preventing us from forming trade unions.