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Turkey

The path of the “Islamist movement”

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The “Islamist movement” which, since the transition to multi-partyism after World War II, had found a niche in the parties of the centre right “ first inside the Democratic Party (DP) and then after the coup d’état in 1960, in the Justice Party (AP) “ first formed an independent political party in the late 1960s.

This followed the expulsion in 1969 of its leader, Necmettin Erbakan, after the cancellation of the elections for the leadership for the Union of Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Stock Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB) by the ruling Justice Party under Demirel. The essential reason underlying the foundation of the Party of National Order (MNP) was then the inadequate representation by the ruling bloc of the interest of the Anatolian bourgeoisie, that is the small and medium industrial and commercial capital of the Anatolian towns. Despite appearances, it was not then religious or cultural considerations which gave rise to the transformation of the Islamist movement into a political party, but class interests. Also, the religious hierarchy has never played any role in this political movement whose leadership has always been “secular”.

The movement gained strength after the coup d’état of March 12, 1971 “ the electoral base of the new Islamist party, the Party of National Salvation (MSP) was around ten per cent “ and also profited from the fragmentation of the political spectrum to play a key role in the country’s political scene, participating in coalition governments, in 1973 with the centre-left, then from 1975 with the centre-right alongside the far right (the Grey Wolves) to form a national front (MC). The MSP defended positions which were more “progressive” in the context of the centre right: for example it envisaged the solution of the Kurdish problem within the framework of “Islamic fraternity” while its socio-economic programme (national developmentalist), summed up in the slogan “the just order”, was a kind of Keynesianism which put the accent on a more equal division of income.

Islamist renaissance under the dictatorship

Although the Islamist movement had lost its electoral base after the coup d’état of September 12, 1980, the 1980s were a period of renaissance for Islamist thought as well as for its reception by various social categories. It should nonetheless be noted that some second ranking political cadre of the MSP, which had been dissolved by the junta, were not banned from political activity and continued their careers inside the Motherland Party (ANAP) founded just before the elections of 1983 by Turgut Özal, who was himself a candidate for the MSP at the parliamentary elections of June 5, 1977. The architect of the famous measures of January 24, 1980 which were the basis for the neoliberal economic policies of the junta, Özal, was also the director of the Organisation of State Planning (DPT) in the 1960s, the president of the federation of engineering employees, and the CEO of Sabancı Holding, the second biggest industrial group in Turkey after Koç Holding. It should also be stressed that the Anatolian bourgeoisie had achieved its real take off, to rise in the hierarchy and become the “Anatolian tigers” thanks to the neoliberal economic policies of the junta which had established a new regime of accumulation favouring exports through subsidies to investment and downward pressure on wages. These policies had been pursued by the ANAP governments which remained in power until 1991. Özal was moreover made minister of the economy by the junta after the coup d’état, before becoming prime minister in 1983, then president in 1989.

The movement then constituted itself once more as a political party under its historic leader Erbakan, and the new party thus founded, the Party of Prosperity (RP), participated in the parliamentary elections of 1991 in alliance with the National Party of Labour (MİP) which was the continuation of the far right MHP party, as well as with a small nationalist party, but was unable to surpass the threshold of 10% of the vote required to enter parliament.

Politics from below

The 1990s saw a significant change in the history of the movement: from its establishment, the new Islamist party had chosen to practice politics from below, by organizing those in the poor neighbourhoods, including at the trade union level, and it adopted positions against neoliberal policies during the municipal elections of 1994. It was also opposed to US policies in the region (it should be remembered that the current president, Abdullah Gül, condemned the coalition against Iraq during the first Gulf War while Haf?z Assad offered it his support). It also profited from the disarray and fragmentation of the centre-left and by mobilizing the discontent of the poor suburbs disappointed by the corruption of the municipal centre left leader, and succeeded in winning control of the town halls in the two biggest cities, Istanbul and Ankara. Whereas the combined vote of the three centre left parties was 36%, the current Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was elected mayor of Istanbul with only 25 % of the vote (thanks to the single round electoral system). In conditions where the Kurdish national movement had not participated in the elections, the RP also won the mayorship of Diyarbakir and increased its vote to 19 % nationwide. Thus a new Islamist conception of local government, which included elements of solidarity in the everyday life of citizens and organized meeting in the houses of ordinary people provided a fertile terrain for the formation of an organic movement which moreover maintains itself today and has constituted the social base of the current Party of Justice and Development (AKP) whose organization and propaganda are based on its experiences.

First government

However the RP, which previously envisaged in its programme an economic system alternative to capitalism and socialism called the “National Vision” (Milli Görüs), had already adopted (although in a controlled fashion) a market economy from 1994. This turn would then with the AKP take an obvious neoliberal orientation.

The RP, which participated in the parliamentary elections of 1995 without an electoral coalition, came first with 21% of the vote, benefiting from the fragmentation of the centre-right and centre-left, thus becoming the key party on the political level. The RP had gained an advantageous position in relation to the other parties, who had lost credibility above all because of the war waged against the Kurds, and sought the means to make a coalition with the two parties of the centre right (the ANAP and the DY) who each won 19 % at the elections. After long negotiations which lasted around six months, the historic leader of the movement, Dr. Necmettin Erbakan, finally became prime minister. Although they had obtained in total 25% of the vote, the two centre-left parties had no influence in Parliament.

The coming to power, even in coalition, of the RP, which represented different Islamist sectors and above all the nomination of its leader as prime minister, added to the fact that the new élites in power had begun to enjoy the benefits of power, led to discontent among the ranks of the traditional Kemalist sectors, and tension rapidly intensified. The reception at the prime minister’s residence of religious leaders, including members of the religious sects and the fact that on a visit to Libya, Erbakan had been incapable of responding to an “undiplomatic” speech by Kaddafi on the form of government in Turkey, the Kurdish problem and NATO, all gave the pretext for strong criticisms of the prime minister.

In November 1996, the accidental death in the same car of a high ranking police officer and a fascist with gangland connections who was involved in a series of murderous attacks before the coup d’état of September 12 (and whose affiliation to the national intelligence organisation, the M?T, is almost certain), as well as the fact that a deputy of the Just Road Party (DYP) – head of a pro-government Kurdish militia – who was in the same car escaped with serious injuries, led to public indignation and some protests. Erbakan underestimated these incidents, but the protests spread through the country. Erbakan did not pursue the investigations on the accident and thus broadened the opposition to his government.

A postmodern coup d'état

On February 28, 1997, the National Security Council [1] took certain decisions which directly targeted the prime minister. Following these decisions, the DYP, the coalition partner of the Erbakan government, was split and withdrew from the coalition. The president at the time, Süleyman Demirel, as well as the army and judiciary together forced the government to resign. The Constitutional Court on January 16, 1998, dissolved the RP on grounds of “activities against the principle of the secular Republic”.

The Party of Virtue (FP) set up to replace the RP gained 15 % and 18 % of the vote at the parliamentary and municipal elections which followed the dissolution of the RP. The ban on participation in the elections of the historic leadership of the movement created a vacuum in the party. The FP was in turn dissolved in June 2001 on the grounds of “demonstrations of fidelity to its leader, banned from political activity” during its congress.

Even if this time the movement immediately put in place a successor to the FP, namely the Party of Happiness (SP), the young guard of the party, who believed in rebellion against the old oligarchy led by Erbakan, profited from the opportunity not to join this new party.

Neoliberal renewal

This young guard preferred to create its own party, the AKP (Party of Justice and Development), shaking off first the “National Vision”. Like the RP, the AKP was set up out of a political vacuum. The government emerged in 1999, from an extremely fragmented parliament, made up essentially of two left nationalist parties on the left and the right, the Democratic Left Party (DSP) and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), who had found a new élan thanks to the rise of a nationalist wave following the arrest and repatriation of Abdullah Özal. As to the third partner of the coalition, it was none other than the party of Özal which then became a small centre right party.

The economic crisis of 2001 hit the government hard and the illness of Prime Minister Ecevit compromised the future of the coalition. In May 2002, speculation as to Ecevit's successor began to circulate and finally the parties of the government took the decision to hold early elections at which none of them was able to reach the 10 % threshold required to enter parliament. The same went for the DYP which was in opposition. Thus the whole political class and all the old parties and leaders paid the price for the crisis.

The AKP emerged victorious from the first elections it contested, without making the least promise or claiming to defend a specific programme, presenting itself as a new party faced with a system of political parties which had already collapsed and putting an end to a decade long period of coalitions.

Many who claimed for so many years to be opposed to the West, the EU and even sometimes to capitalism, now adopted neoliberal policies and transformed themselves, into a new centre right party, benefiting from the disarray and fragmentation of the centre right, instead of remaining a dissident movement.

The AKP profile during the November 2002 elections raised many doubts. First it organized visits to the USA to reassure the US administration. Then, the representatives of capital both at home and abroad found these people, whose discourse had in the past been rather radical, a little strange. The state institutions, above all the army and the judiciary were extremely distrustful of them. They had not yet understood that the AKP, although it originated from the RP, had betrayed its old tradition to integrate itself in the system.

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[1] the MGK was the constitutional institution which was the visible face of the “military supervision” and brought together the military hierarchy and the prime minister with some members of the government under the leadership of the President. The majority of its members are now civilians