Over the past several decades, the strength of Islamism, or political Islam, has been growing in Turkey. Prior to 1970, the religious right was just a faction within the mainstream center-right parties. In the 1970s, it emerged as a separate political movement under the leadership of Necmattin Erbakan, who founded the Milli Görüş movement. Islamic parties have faced strong scrutiny by the Kemalist authorities and were banned or closed down on several occasions. However, they have recently reemerged in various guises, attesting to their durability and ability to attract an important segment of the Turkish electorate. Still, until recently, they remained largely a fringe movement.

The success of the AKP, which has Islamic roots, in the two most recent national elections, however, demonstrates the growing strength of political Islam. In the November 2002 elections, the AKP won 34 percent of the vote, enabling it to govern on its own. In the July 2007 election, it fared even better, winning 46.6 percent of the vote, more than twice that of the CHP, the party representing the Atatürk secular tradition, which came in second with 20.9 percent of the vote.¹

This is a remarkable achievement for a party that did not exist before August 2001, and it underscores the degree to which a form of political Islam has moved out of the political shadows to become a major actor in Turkish politics. The AKP defines itself as a “conservative democratic” party, not as an Islamist party, but many Kemalists fear that it has a hidden Islamic agenda and that its ascendance poses

¹ In alliance with the smaller, left-of-center Democratic Left Party (Demokratik Sol Parti (DSP)). In 2002, the CHP won 19.4 percent of the vote, and the DSP won 1.2 percent.
a threat to the secularist nature of the Turkish state. What explains the rise of religion-based politics in Turkey? Does the AKP’s success represent a “re-Islamization” of Turkish political life and foreign policy? What are its implications for Turkey’s political development and foreign-policy orientation?

The Impact of the Kemalist Revolution

The rise of political Islam in Turkey has its roots in the reforms undertaken in the late Ottoman period and in the nature of the political transformation undertaken after the founding of the Turkish Republic by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923. Atatürk’s attempt to transform Turkey into a modern, Western, secular state essentially represented a “revolution from above.” It was a state-instituted, top-down enterprise in social engineering carried out by a small military-bureaucratic elite that imposed its secularist vision on a reluctant traditional society. In carrying out this transformation, the elite made little effort to co-opt or cajole the population or the opposition. As Doğu Ergil noted, “Neither the secularization nor the Turkification of the nation was negotiated with the people in a serious way.” Instead the elite simply tried to use the “strong state” to overwhelm and intimidate any opposition.

2 There were important elements of continuity between the Westernization efforts undertaken in the late Ottoman period and those carried out by the Kemalists. Both were elitist, state-driven, and hostile to the development of autonomous groups and civil society. For a detailed discussion, see Metin Heper, “The Ottoman Legacy and Turkish Politics,” Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 54, No. 1, Fall 2000, pp. 62–82. See also Şerif Mardin, “Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?” Daedalus, Vol. 102, Winter 1973, pp. 169–190. For a comprehensive discussion of the founding of the Turkish Republic and its early political transformation, see Bernard Lewis, The Emergence of Modern Turkey, London: Oxford University Press, 1968; Lord Kinross, Atatürk, New York: William Morrow, 1964; and Andrew Mango, Atatürk, New York: The Overlook Press, 1999.


The new Kemalist elite sought a radical break with the Ottoman past. The Ottoman era and everything associated with it, except a few elements of past grandeur, were condemned and discarded in favor of a new project based on Westernization and secularism. In the first decade after the founding of the republic, the Kemalists carried out a series of reforms that severed Turkey’s ties to its Islamic past and to the Islamic world more broadly. The caliphate, led by the spiritual head of the Muslim Sunni world, was abolished. The Latin alphabet (modified to accommodate Turkish sounds) was introduced in place of Arabic script, and an effort was made to purge the Turkish language of words of Arabic and Persian origin that had migrated into it during the Ottoman period. The elite discouraged traditional attire and secularized the education system. All religious institutions and resources were brought under the control of the state.

However, most of these reforms were limited to the urban centers; the countryside remained largely untouched. Until the 1950s, the bulk of the Turkish population remained isolated and traditional, while the urban centers were modern and secular. In effect, two Turkeys coexisted in uneasy harmony: an urban, modern, secular “center” and a rural, traditional, religious “periphery,”5 with little contact between them. The dominant elite was urban, modern, and secular, while the greater part of the population was rural, traditional, and pious.

Religion was not completely suppressed or eliminated. It was simply banished from the public sphere and strictly subordinated to and supervised by the state, through the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). In effect, religious institutions became appendages of the state, with their personnel acting as civil servants. In the countryside, however, Islam continued to have strong social roots and remained largely beyond state control despite a ban on religious orders (tarikatlar) introduced in 1925.

5 For a detailed discussion of the “center-periphery” dichotomy and its impact on Turkish politics, see Mardin, “Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?” pp. 169–190.
Indeed, a kind of religious “counterculture” existed outside the cities. In response to their forced exclusion from the political sphere, many Muslims established their own informal networks and educational systems. The religious networks and brotherhoods such as the Nakşibendi and the Nurculuk movement became a kind of “counter-public sphere” and the incubator of a more popular Islamic identity. Islam, as Hakan Yavuz has noted, remained the “hidden identity of the Kemalist state” and provided the vernacular for the marginalized majority excluded from the top-down transformation.6

Like its Ottoman predecessor, the Kemalist state discouraged the development of autonomous groups outside the control of the state. Autonomous activity, especially religious activity, was regarded by the state as a potential threat to its ability to carry out its modernization effort and consolidate its political control. Dissent or opposition to the regime’s nationalist ideology and modernization policies was quickly suppressed. This attempt to suppress expressions of autonomous activity outside the control of the state not only alienated the large majority of the rural population, for whom religion was an important part of daily life, it also hindered the development of civil society more generally.7

The Kemalist state’s modernization efforts provoked resistance among certain groups, particularly the Kurds. During the early years of the Turkish Republic, the new state faced a series of rebellions by the Kurds, who, accustomed to the Ottoman Empire’s more tolerant attitude toward ethnicity and Islam, opposed the regime’s emphasis on Turkish nationalism and secularism. These rebellions mixed ethnicity with religion and were a consequence of the unhinging of Anatolian society by Kemalist modernization policies.8

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8 Interestingly, the first of these rebellions, the Şeyh Said Rebellion in 1925, was redefined by the regime as a religious rebellion to bring back the caliphate—not a Kurdish rebellion. See Barkey, op. cit., p. 91.
After Atatürk’s death in 1938, the authoritarian tendencies of the regime intensified. Atatürk’s successor, İsmet İnönü, sought to build the regime’s legitimacy on a strict interpretation of Kemalism. One-party rule served as a means to carry out a radical transformation of Turkish society. The majority of the population remained outside of politics and wedded to traditional habits and lifestyles over which Islam continued to exert an important influence.

In a sense, what has occurred over the past several decades is an attempt by this marginalized periphery to find its political voice and representation. Political Islam has increasingly provided that voice. Over time, the political goals and ideology of the Islamic movement have evolved, and it has jettisoned or moderated many key tenets of its initial political agenda, particularly its hostility to Westernization, in an effort to attract broader political support.

The Advent of Multiparty Democracy

The establishment of a multiparty system in 1946 was an important turning point in the rise of political Islam in Turkey. With the establishment of this system, the CHP (the party representing Kemalism) lost its monopoly on power. Thereafter, parties were forced to compete for power, and Islam became an important factor in attracting votes. The pious rural periphery, which had largely been excluded from politics since the founding of the republic in 1923, now became an important political constituency whose interests had to be taken into consideration by conservative political parties. At the same time, the CHP, which had ruled unopposed for more than two decades, was forced to adopt a more tolerant attitude toward Islam.

In 1950, the Democratic Party (DP), which was headed by Adnan Menderes, won a parliamentary majority, ending the CHP’s monopoly of power. The DP was much less wedded to Kemalist conceptions of the state and appealed to those parts of society that felt marginalized and aggrieved by secularized Westernization policies. The DP promised to end some of the draconian secularist policies instituted by the Kemalist regime and also to reduce some of the cultural restrictions
imposed on the Kurds. In effect, the DP “relegitimized Islam and traditional rural values.” As a result, these groups gradually were drawn into the competitive political arena for the first time. At the same time, Menderes’ more liberal economic policies involved a limited movement away from the state-driven economic model.

Menderes’ policies, though hardly revolutionary, were regarded as heretical and dangerous by many Kemalists and prompted the Turkish military to intervene in 1960 in the first of several coups. The military turned power back over to the politicians in 1961 and returned to the barracks—but only after instituting a number of reforms that strengthened its political role. One of the most important reforms was the creation of the National Security Council (MGK), a body dominated by the military and entrusted with ensuring that the government’s domestic and foreign policies were in line with the basic tenets of the Kemalist revolution, particularly secularism. While technically an advisory body, the MKG institutionalized the role of the military in the political process and provided a mechanism by which the military could transmit its views directly to the civilian leadership.

At the same time, the 1961 constitution expanded the scope for associational freedom, which led to the proliferation of autonomous groups, including religious groups. Religious organizations that had resurfaced in the 1960s mushroomed in the 1970s. Different Sufi tarikatlar and religious networks helped the poor cope with the problems of modernization and became clubs for dislocated groups seeking solidarity in a rapidly changing world.

In this less-restrictive environment, religious forces were able to form their own separate political party, the National Order Party (MNP), the first in a series of religious parties established under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan.

The Menderes era thus had several important results. First, it expanded the process of democratization and opened up the political arena to religious and ethnic groups that had previously been margin-

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9 Mardin, “Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?” p. 185.
alized or excluded from politics. Second, it provided political space for religious groups to resurface and begin to organize politically.

The “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis”

Ironically, the military contributed to the strengthening of political Islam in Turkey. An upsurge of left-wing and right-wing violence that brought Turkey to the brink of civil war in the 1970s eventually prompted the military to intervene in 1980 to restore order. In an effort to combat communism and leftist ideologies, the military attempted to strengthen the role of Islam. Under the military’s tutelage, religious education was made a compulsory subject in all schools. Quranic classes were opened, and state-controlled moral and religious education was promoted.

In effect, the military sought to institute a process of state-controlled “Islamization from above.” By fusing Islamic symbols with nationalism, the military hoped to create a more homogeneous and less political Islamic community and to insulate the population from the influence of left-wing ideologies. Based on the tripod of “the family, the mosque, and the barracks,” this new “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” was designed to reduce the appeal of radical leftist ideologies and also to diminish the influence of non-Turkish strands of Islamic thinking from Pakistan and the Arab world. The military also hoped the new synthesis would act as a counter to Islamic radicalism from Iran.

In composing this new synthesis, the military drew on the work of a group of conservative scholars who belonged to Aydınlar Ocağı (Intellectuals’ Hearth). This association promulgated a moral and philosophical rationale for the synthesis, building an ideology out of Ottoman, Islamic, and Turkish popular culture to legitimize the hegemony

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of the new ruling elite. Reinterpreting the nation and state as a family and community, these scholars selectively used Ottoman-Islamic ideas to make the past relevant to the present and to cement differing interests together by emphasizing the danger to family, nation, and state posed by ideological fragmentation. The educational system and the media were then used to disseminate a popularized version of the ideology to the masses.

The architects of this ideological program hoped to create a new form of depoliticized Turkish-Islamic culture that would reunify society and provide the basis for a unified, strong, and stable state. The synthesis, however, sent an ambiguous message. On one hand, under the 1982 constitution, Turkey was defined as a secular state. On the other hand, the role of religion was strengthened in schools and education as a means of reinforcing Turkish nationalism, which tended to weaken the emphasis on secularism. At the same time, it provided opportunities for the Islamists to expand and reinforce their own message.

The Impact of the Özal Reforms

The economic and political reforms carried out under Prime Minister Turgut Özal in the mid-1980s also contributed to strengthening the role of Islamic groups. The reforms weakened the state’s control over the economy and created a new class of entrepreneurs and capitalists in the provincial towns of Anatolia, including Denizli, Gaziantep, and Kahramanmaraş. The economic upswing created a new middle class—the so-called “Anatolian bourgeoisie”—with strong roots in Islamic culture. This group favors liberal economic policies and a reduction of the role of the state in the economic and social spheres. It also supports

greater religious freedom. In the 1990s, it supported the Welfare Party. Today, it is one of the core constituencies backing the AKP.

Özal’s reforms also resulted in an inflow of capital, much of it from the Arab world. This allowed the Islamists to organize politically. Under Özal’s more tolerant approach to religion, Muslim groups and brotherhoods were given greater freedoms and were allowed to finance the construction of private schools and universities. The reforms also opened up greater political space for new political groups—including the Islamists. Islamist groups gained access to important media outlets and newspaper chains, which allowed them to reach a much broader political audience. TV, in particular, provided an important means of propagating their message.

Demographic changes also had an impact. The industrial and modernization policies pursued by successive Turkish governments led to a large-scale influx of the rural population into the cities. These rural migrants brought with them their traditional habits, beliefs, and customs. Uprooted and alienated, many lived in makeshift shanty-towns (gecekondu mahallesi) on the outskirts of large cities and were not integrated into urban culture. They represented an important pool of potential voters for Islamic parties opposed to Westernization and the forces of globalization, such as the series of Erbakan’s Milli Görüş parties (see below). At the same time, the large influx of migrants contributed to an internal “clash of civilizations.” The two Turkeys—one secular and urban, the other rural and pious—were brought into closer proximity with one another, exacerbating social tensions.

In many ways, Özal embodied these clashing traditions. A Western-trained technocrat who had worked for the World Bank, he was also a supporter of the Nakşibendi order and had been associated with Erbakan’s National Salvation Party before founding the Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi (ANAP)) in 1983. He thus bridged the

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14 Şerif Mardin has pointed to the important role played by the expansion of the media in propagating the “Islamic voice” and contributing to the rise of Islamic political parties. See Mardin, “Turkish Islamic Exceptionalism Yesterday and Today,” p. 157.

15 Until 1989, Turkey had only one television channel, the state-run TRT. The first religiously oriented channels began to emerge in 1993 and were linked to the Gülen movement.
The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey

secular-Islamic divide. As Henri Barkey noted, “He was as comfortable with Western leaders as in a mosque.”

The Rise of the Religious Right

These economic and social changes contributed to an upsurge in the political strength of Islamic political groups in the 1970s and 1980s. Its first independent political expression was the establishment of the National Order Party (MNP) in January 1970. The MNP was the first of several Islamic parties led by Necmettin Erbakan. It advocated a new economic and social order based on “national” (read Islamic) principles. However, the MNP’s existence was short-lived. The party was shut down after a military intervention in 1971 on the grounds that it was against the secular nature of the state.

The founders of the MNP and its successors came out of the National View (Milli Görüş) movement, whose leaders sought a return to traditional values and institutions. They regarded the Kemalist attempt to replace the Islamic-Ottoman state and culture with a Western model as a historic mistake and the source of all the ills in Turkish society. Their goal was to build a “national (Islamic) order” and put an end to the process of Westernization. They saw Turkey’s identity and future closely linked with the Muslim world, rather than with the West.

The National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi (MSP)) was founded in October 1972. Like the MNP, which was closed in May 1971, the MSP fused Islam and Turkish nationalism. The MSP’s slogan was “A Great Turkey Once Again” (“Yeniden Büyük Türkiye”). The party’s proposed solution to Turkey’s problems was to return to Islam’s


teachings and a “Muslim way of life.” The MNP declared that the process of Westernization had fragmented Turkish society and led to a loss of grandeur and that a policy of industrialization, based on “native” heavy industry created by Anatolian capital, would create a strong nation that would turn its back on the West and become the leader of the Muslim world. In place of ties to the West, the MSP favored the creation of a Muslim Common Market, with the Islamic dinar as its common currency, and the development of a Muslim Defense Alliance.  

The MSP was a coalition of different Islamic and conservative groups. While the party’s leader, Necmettin Erbakan, maintained tight political control, there were conflicts from the outset among the different groups and religious orders over the party’s political orientation, as well as over Erbakan’s authoritarian leadership style. These political and ideological divisions became more pronounced after Erbakan’s ill-fated tenure as prime minister (1996–1997) and eventually resulted in the split in the movement in 2001 that gave rise to the AKP.

In the 1970s, the MSP established itself as an important actor in Turkish political life. It gained third place in the 1973 election, with 12 percent of the vote and 11 percent of the seats in parliament. Erbakan formed a coalition government with the CHP, becoming deputy prime minister under Bülent Ecevit. After the coalition collapsed, the MSP joined the National Front governments headed by Süleyman Demirel in 1975 and 1977.

After the military coup in 1980, the MSP was closed down, and Erbakan and his lieutenants were banned from political activities for ten years. However, the party reemerged in 1983 under a new name—the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi (RP)). Welfare’s ideology differed little from that of the MSP. It expressed the same hostility to Westernization


20 For a detailed discussion of the political and ideological struggles within the MSP, see Atacan, “Explaining Religious Politics at the Crossroad: AKP-SP,” pp. 187–199.
and the same anti-Western bias. Its economic program, “Just Order,” stressed the need for greater social justice and equality and an end to undue Western influence. In foreign policy, Welfare advocated cutting Turkey’s ties to the West and closer integration with the Muslim world.

In the 1987 elections, Welfare received 7.16 percent of the vote—short of the 10 percent needed for representation in parliament. As a result, the religious right was not represented as a separate party in parliament during the 1980s. Many of Welfare’s adherents joined Özal’s Motherland Party (ANAP), which brought together religious and bureaucratic secular conservatives under one roof, siphoning off support from the religious right that otherwise would have gone to Welfare.

**Political Islam in Power: The Welfare Interlude**

Political Islam witnessed a strong resurgence in the early 1990s. In the March 1994 local elections, the Welfare Party received 19 percent of the vote and won the mayor’s office in 28 municipalities, including Turkey’s two largest cities, Istanbul and Ankara. In the 1995 national elections, Welfare came in first with 21.6 percent of the vote and formed a coalition with the right-of-center True Path Party (the successor to Demirel’s Justice Party), with Erbakan as prime minister. Welfare’s stunning victory sent shock waves throughout the secular establishment, especially the military. For the first time since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Turkey was run by an Islamist party, with an Islamist prime minister.

Several factors contributed to Welfare’s strong showing. Perhaps most important was a shift in Welfare’s political agenda, which put stronger emphasis on social issues rather than religious themes.21 This allowed Welfare to broaden its appeal beyond the hard-core religious right. At the same time, Welfare’s populist but catchy Just Order pro-

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gram allowed it to gain important support among the urban poor who traditionally had voted for the CHP.

Welfare was the best organized of all the political parties, with a legion of devout Muslims, especially women, who did volunteer work for the party and provided a network of social-welfare help to the poor. The party’s grassroots network was extremely effective, working in the gecekondu and other poor urban areas, helping residents to find jobs, providing hospital and health care, distributing free food, and providing other social amenities.

Welfare also benefited from a strong anti-Western backlash generated by the EU’s rejection of Turkey’s membership application at its December 1989 summit, which was seen by many Turks as motivated by cultural and religious biases, as well as by the West’s failure to stop the killing of Muslims in Bosnia. The increasing disappointment with the West gave resonance to Welfare’s strong anti-Western rhetoric.

However, once in office, Welfare showed little capacity for addressing Turkey’s mounting domestic problems. Erbakan found it difficult to balance his anti-system campaign rhetoric with the need to consider the interests of the secular establishment, which was highly suspicious of his political goals, as well as of his commitment to democracy. Instead of pursuing policies designed to reduce social tensions, Erbakan further polarized Turkish society along secular-Islamic lines. He angered hard-core Islamist supporters by accepting a customs union with the EU and continuing to honor treaties with Israel that he had promised to annul. At the same time, he inflamed the secular establishment by saying that rectors of universities would have to kiss the hands of female students wearing headscarves (the wearing of headscarves was forbidden in universities) and threatening to build a mosque in Taksim Square, a major public transportation hub in the heart of Istanbul.

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23 The first Erdoğan-led municipal government of Istanbul tried to revive the Taksim Square mosque project, as well as another mosque project on the European side, in Göztepe Park. Both projects were shelved because of public opposition.
Moreover, in his first months in office, Erbakan undertook a number of foreign-policy initiatives—including an ill-fated trip to Libya and the promotion of an Islamic economic grouping (the D-8) as an alternative to the EU—that indicated that he intended to push an Islamist foreign policy.

These moves, together with Erbakan’s often intemperate rhetoric, alarmed the secular establishment, particularly the military. However, rather than intervening directly, as it had in 1960, 1971, and 1980, the military used more-subtle and indirect methods to force Erbakan’s ouster. On February 28, 1997, the National Security Council—which was dominated by the military—presented Erbakan with a list of recommendations to curb anti-secular activity. When Erbakan balked at implementing the recommendations, the military held a series of briefings and mobilized the secular establishment against him, eventually forcing him to resign in June 1997 in what has been termed a “silent” or “post-modern” coup. In January 1998, the Welfare Party was closed down, and Erbakan and his key lieutenants were banned from politics for five years.

The Impact of the February 28 Process

The “February 28 process,” as the military’s effort to force Erbakan’s resignation is termed in Turkey, was an important political watershed. It marked the abandonment of the idea that religion could be used to consolidate society, which had been at the root of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis. Thereafter, the military embarked on an overt campaign against Islamist ideas and ideology, which together with Kurdish separatism was singled out as one of the main threats to Turkish security.

At the same time, the February 28 process had an important impact on the orientation and development of the Islamist movement. It underscored the fact that a direct, head-on attempt to push an overt

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Islamic agenda could not succeed and would generate strong opposition from the secularists, especially the military. Many members of the Islamist movement concluded that the only way the Islamists could succeed was by avoiding a direct confrontation with the secularists and deemphasizing the religious agenda.

This recognition sparked an intense internal debate and rethinking within the Islamic movement about the movement’s future political strategy and agenda, and a growing philosophical and political rift emerged within the movement between two different groups. The “traditionalists” (Gelenekçiler), centered on Erbakan and his chief lieutenant, Recai Kutan, opposed any serious change in approach or policy, while a younger group of “modernists,” or “reformists” (Yenilikçiler), led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the mayor of Istanbul, and his close associate Abdullah Gül, argued that the party needed to rethink its approach to a number of fundamental issues, particularly democracy, human rights, and relations with the West. The reformists also opposed Erbakan’s authoritarian leadership style and called for greater inner-party democracy.

The influence of this internal debate was reflected in the platform of the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi (FP)), which replaced the Welfare Party. However, while Virtue was Welfare’s successor, it differed in a number of important respects. Unlike Welfare, which was ideologically hostile to the West and Westernization, Virtue began to embrace Western political values. In short, anti-Westernism and suspicion of the West were no longer a hallmark of Islamist discourse.  

The influence of this internal debate was reflected in the platform of the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi (FP)), which replaced the Welfare Party. However, while Virtue was Welfare’s successor, it differed in a number of important respects. Unlike Welfare, which was ideologically hostile to the West and Westernization, Virtue began to embrace Western political values. In short, anti-Westernism and suspicion of the West were no longer a hallmark of Islamist discourse.  

A timeline of the religious-right parties is shown in Figure 3.1.

After the Virtue Party was shut down by the Constitutional Court in June 2001, the movement formally split. The traditionalists established the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi (SP)), under the formal leadership of Recai Kutan, with Erbakan exerting the real leadership behind the scenes. The modernists founded a new party, the AKP, with Erdoğan

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25 This shift was symbolized by Virtue’s decision to take Welfare’s closure and Erbakan’s ban from politics to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). As İhsan Dağı has noted, the decision to seek justice in Europe was particularly ironic in light of Erbakan’s past stinging criticism of Europe as unjust, exploitative, and imperialistic. Dağı, “Transformation of Islamic Political Identity,” p. 28.
as party chairman. This split represented a fundamental ideological rift in the Milli Görüş movement. The older generation of politicians around Erbakan, who founded the Felicity Party, were traditionalists and adhered to many of the founding ideas of the movement. They saw their mission as establishing a “new civilization” based on traditional Islamic values and were reluctant to make practical compromises with the secular establishment to expand their political support.

They were also anti-Western and regarded Islam as incompatible with Western values. This anti-Westernism is a key feature of Felicity’s political outlook and agenda. The party opposes Turkish membership in the EU, arguing that Turkey should intensify its ties to the Muslim world. Europe is portrayed as an enemy of Islam whose ultimate aim is to divide and weaken Turkey.

The founders of the AKP, by contrast, were open to cooperation with the secular establishment. The AKP program emphasizes the party’s loyalty to the fundamental values and constitution of the Turkish Republic.26 While the AKP has Islamic roots—many of its leaders,

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### Figure 3.1
Evolution of Religious-Right Parties in Turkey

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- **I** Erbakan and friends as independent MPs
- **MNP** Milli Nizam Partisi (National Order Party)
- **MSP** Milli Selamet Partisi (National Salvation Party)
- **N P** No political parties allowed by National Security Council
- **RP** Refah Partisi (Welfare Party)
- **FP** Fazilet Partisi (Virtue Party)
- **SP** Saadet Partisi (Felicity Party)
- **AKP** Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party)
including Erdoğan and Gül, came out of the Milli Görüş movement and had been members of the Welfare and Virtue parties—the AKP defines itself not as an Islamic party but as a conservative democratic party similar to Christian democratic parties in Western Europe.

This is an important ideological shift. Islamic political identity traditionally was built on opposition to the West, which was regarded as an entity to be rejected or countered. However, since its establishment in 2001, the AKP has increasingly emphasized Western political values such as democracy, respect for human rights, and the rule of law in its public discourse. At the same time, the party has come to view the West, especially the EU, as an important ally in its struggle against the restrictions of the Kemalist state. Whereas Islamists in Turkey in the past regarded Western calls for greater democratic reform as an attempt to impose alien values on Turkish society, the AKP sees the Western agenda increasingly overlapping with its own. The party views membership in the EU as a means of reducing the influence of the military and establishing a political framework that will expand religious tolerance and ensure its own political survival.

The jettisoning of anti-Western rhetoric has been accompanied by an abandonment of the anti-globalization discourse that characterized the Islamist movement in the past. The 2001 economic crisis made clear that strict adherence to the program of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and attracting more foreign investment were indispensable to overcoming Turkey’s financial difficulties and putting the Turkish economy back on its feet. Thus the AKP has promoted liberal market policies designed to attract foreign investment and integrate Turkey more closely into the global economy.

The Ascendency of the AKP

The AKP’s ideological makeover and its adoption of a different political discourse have helped the party expand its political appeal and support. The AKP won the November 2002 elections with 34 percent of the vote, well ahead of the secularist CHP, which placed second with 19 percent of the vote. As only these two parties obtained sufficient votes
to cross the 10 percent threshold needed for representation in parliament, the AKP received nearly two-thirds of the seats in the National Assembly, enabling it to form a government on its own.

The AKP’s adoption of a more moderate and pragmatic political message undoubtedly contributed to its electoral success in the 2002 elections (see Figure 3.2). But several other factors helped as well. One was the disastrous performance of the Turkish economy. The Turkish currency was devalued several times, the banking sector was devastated, and the economy shrank by a historic 9.5 percent in 2001. A second contributing factor was corruption. The AKP was able to exploit public discontent with revelations of corruption in the mainstream secular parties and to portray itself as the party of “clean government.”

The AKP also benefited from the demise of the Turkish left in the early 1990s. The AKP (and Welfare before it) succeeded in filling the vacuum created by the decline of the left, especially in working-class

Figure 3.2
Parliamentary-Election Performance of the Religious Right in Turkey

neighborhoods. The AKP made its biggest gains among the recent immigrants in the varoş, a group which today forms a plurality in Turkish urban areas. These people are pious and socially conservative and are not attracted to secular parties on either the left or the right.

The varoş is one of the most important sources of AKP power. The AKP has skillfully drawn on its well-developed local infrastructure and social networks, much of which was established by the Welfare Party, to expand its political support among the working-class poor in Turkey's large urban areas. These factors, rather than an appeal to Islam, explain the AKP's success.

The July 22, 2007, Election

The results of the July 22, 2007, election demonstrate even more vividly the degree to which the AKP has been able to expand its base of support. Whereas it received 34 percent of the vote in the November 2002 election, it obtained 46.6 percent of the vote in the July 22, 2007, election—an increase of more than 12 percent. Moreover, the AKP increased its electoral support in all seven regions of the country. The most important increases occurred in the predominantly Kurdish areas of southeastern Anatolia. The AKP also increased its support in the five largest cities in Turkey. In Istanbul, it received almost as many votes as all its opponents combined. This suggests that the AKP is gradually extending its hold from the periphery toward the city centers. The party’s main support, however, comes from the poorer and less-developed parts of the cities (the varoş).

While the 2007 election showed clear cleavages between the center and the periphery, with the CHP doing best in the wealthier parts of the larger cities, it also showed, as Tanju Tosun has pointed out, that the AKP represents a catch-all party and should not be regarded

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27 Lower-class residential areas on the outskirts of urban centers.

as a religious party. Indeed, the support it received from different social groups gives the AKP the attributes of a center-right party. It has managed to blend cultural preferences typical of the right with social-economic policies that are generally associated with the left and that are favored by the electorate as a whole. Economic stability was a primary concern of the voters and a key factor in the AKP’s electoral success. The military’s so-called “midnight memorandum” on April 27, 2007, which contained a veiled threat of possible military intervention, also seems to have contributed to the increase in the AKP’s popular support.

30 Ibid, p. 56.