

Regime Opposition as a Source of Party Policy Change: The Case of the Turkish Religious Right

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the examination of the role of the Turkish state elites on the change in the political line of the Turkish religious right. To do this, the article respectively analyzes the course of radicalization in the religious right, the secularist backlash it encountered, and the ensuing process of moderation to which it has been introduced. Based on an in-depth empirical analysis, it is observed that the Turkish religious right has gone through a notable process of moderation in response to successive reactions displayed by the secularist state elites. Assuming a cooperative and conciliatory attitude from the beginning, the movement has gradually abandoned its religious fundamentalist discourse and demonstrated a remarkable resolution to incorporate contemporary political norms and understandings into the core of its political agenda.

Keywords: 28 February, State Elites, Secularism, Political Islam, Justice and Development Party

1. Introduction

The causes of change in the political orientation of the Turkish religious right have been studied very popularly. The secularist reaction of the state elites, globalization, Europeanization and growing civil society activism are often pointed as the leading causes of the change.¹ This article scrutinizes the impact of the state elites among others with a detailed empirical analysis. The aspects of analysis conducted for this purpose include the examination of the radicalization of the Turkish religious right, the ensuing response by the state elites and its reception by the religious right.

Turkish religious right has substantially reformulated its programmatic agenda in terms of the importance given to religious concerns. While the traditional National View (Milli Görüş) Parties had the purpose to introduce some religious norms and practices in public life, reaching to campaigns to establish an Islamic state on some occasions;² the breakaway Justice and Development Party has appeared with a comparatively moderate party program which communicated itself in form of the promotion of contemporary political norms and institutions such as democracy, human rights and rule of law with a clear rejection of the idea of Islam as a political doctrine. The article will investigate this change vis-à-vis the pressures applied by the secularist state elites.

¹Ziya Öniş, "Globalization and Party Transformation: Turkey's Justice and Development Party in Perspective," in Peter Burnell, (ed.), *Globalizing Democracy: Party Politics in Emerging Democracies* (London: Routledge, Warwick Studies on Globalization, 2006); İhsan Dağı, "The Justice and Development Party: Identity, Politics and Discourse of Human Rights in the Search for Security and Legitimacy," in Hakan Yavuz, (ed.), *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Party* (Salt Lake City: Utah University Press, 2006).

² The National View (Milli Görüş) could be described in short as the characteristically conservative currency of thought and action plan propagated by Necmettin Erbakan since late 1960s. It has been the major ideological program behind the National Order Party, National Salvation Party, Welfare Party, Virtue Party and the Felicity Party politics. It differed from other political movements in Turkey with its persistent support for moral development, religious education, Islamic economy, proximity with the Muslim world, and opposition to the west and westernization. Necmettin Erbakan, *Milli Görüş* (National View), (İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 1975); Fulya Atacan, "Explaining Religious Politics at the Crossroad: AKP-SP," *Turkish Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2005), pp. 187-188.

The article intends to contribute to the research conducted on the topic with its extensive empirical research that covers the analysis of speeches, publications, party programs and other types of communications produced by relevant political parties on the subject; again the speeches, documents, court cases and other types of expressions of opinion and reactions raised by various members of secularist state elites; as well as the scholarly views offered by various specialists of Turkish politics. The article begins with a review of the theories of party change to place the findings within the broader domain of party politics.

2. Theoretical Approaches to Party Change

Harmel and Janda describe party change as the kind of variations in party strategies, goals, policies or organizational structure.³ Party change is often argued to originate from three variables, i.e., leadership change, dominant party coalition change and environmental change. Leadership change could cause party change for reasons of differences between leaders in their talents, characteristics and objectives.⁴ Dominant party coalition change, secondly, can cause party change particularly when a new party coalition supporting a different set of ideological, organizational and strategic preferences captures the control in the party.⁵ As for environmental change, Harmel and Janda offer a sophisticated analysis to its influence which can be summarized in short in Table 1.⁶

Table 1: Environmental Change as an Agent of Party Change

Party Type	Environmental Stimulus
Vote-Maximizing	Decline in electoral share
Office-Maximizing	Exclusion from the government
Policy/Ideology Advocating	Ideological changes around the globe, pressures from domestic power blocs, globalization etc.
Intraparty Democracy Seeking	Decline in the number of party members, change in the character and views of party members,

In a more specific research conducted over 25 party change cases to explore the impact of environmental changes on party ideological change, Harmel and Janda observe a correlation of -0.12 between regime opposition and party ideological extremism. The correlation tells us that if regimes proscribe membership to extremist ideologies, parties tend to cower from adopting extremist ideological policies most often because of the fears that the party could be closed or that party members could be banned from politics.⁷ This article applies Harmel and Janda's thesis on the Turkish case with very rich and deep empirical research.⁸

³ Robert Harmel and Kenneth Janda, "An Integrated Theory of Party Goals and Party Change," *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, No. 6 (1994), p. 275

⁴ Frank Wilson, "The Sources of Party Change: The Social Democratic Parties in Britain, France, Germany, and Spain," in Karl Lawson (ed.), *How Political Parties Work* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), pp. 275-281; Robert Harmel and et al. "Performance, Leadership, Factions, and Party Change: An Empirical Analysis," *West European Politics*, No.18 (January 1995), pp. 4-5; Angelo Panebianco, *Political Parties: Organization and Power* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 244.

⁵ Robert Harmel and Alexander C. Tan, "Party Actors and Party Change: Does Factional Dominance Matter?" *European Journal of Political Research*, No. 42 (2003), p. 410; S. B. Wolinetz, "Internal Politics and Rates of Change in the Partij van de Arbeid, 1957-1994." *DNPP Jaarboek 1995* (Groningen: Riksuniversiteit Groningen, 1996), p. 125.

⁶ Harmel and Janda, (1994), pp. 269-271; see also Robert Harmel and Michelle M. Taylor-Robinson, "Application of the Integrated Theory of Party Change to Latin America's Volatile Party Systems," (5 CEISAL European Congress of Latinamericanists, Brussels, Belgium, April 2007).

⁷ Robert Harmel and Kenneth Janda, *Parties and Their Environments: Limits to Reform?* (New York & London: Longman Inc., 1982), pp. 32, 34.

⁸ The article is based on a hypothesis that regime opposition to anti-secularist activities of the religious right cast itself more firmly in Turkey and acted more toward the moderation of the religious right. This is firstly because Turkish secularism represents one of the most rigid examples of its kinds in the world. And, secondly, the politics of religion differs substantially in Muslim countries like Turkey for Islam embodies a legal and political framework and history. Ümit Cizre-Sakallıoğlu and Menderes Çınar, "Turkey 2002: Kemalism, Islamism and Politics in the Light of 'the February 28 Process'," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, No.102 (2003), pp. 233-235; Ziya Öniş, "Political Islam at the Crossroads: From Hegemony to Co-existence," *Contemporary Politics* Vol. 7, No. 4. (2001), pp. 291-292; William Hale, "Christian Democracy and the AKP: Parallels and the Contrasts," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2005), pp. 299-300.

3. The Road to the 28 February 1997 NSC Meeting: Background

The leading actor of the Turkish religious right in 1970s, the National Salvation Party (NSP), was closed down after the 1980 military intervention on account of violating secularism. After the end of the military rule, a new party was formed in 1983 with the name Welfare Party (WP) as a legatee to the NSP. The WP steadily boosted its electoral share from the first election it participated in 1984 (See Table 1 below).

	1984	1986	1987	1989	1991	1994	1995
General Elections		4.76 percent	7.16 percent		16.9 percent		21.37 percent
Municipal Elections	4.44 percent			9.8 percent		19.14 percent	

On par with its growing electoral appeal, the WP was emboldened to adopt a radical political line. Both in the party and the grassroots, there were calls for the introduction of Islamic law and statehood. To illustrate, on 13th January 1991, Necmettin Erbakan was saying that:

If you don't serve to the Welfare Party, your prayers are not be accepted. One cannot be Muslim without serving the Welfare... This party is an army of Islamic Jihad... If you are a Muslim, you have to be a soldier of this army... Alms must be given to headquarters of the army of Jihad, to party centers in the counties...⁹

On another occasion, Welfare Party Representative Şevki Yılmaz was proposing, during one of his speeches before the parliamentary elections, that Turkey had to meet with the Koranic Order, Islamic state and law and that the Muslims had to wage jihad for this purpose.¹⁰

While there was a growing reaction from various members of the state elites against these kind of actions, there was not much of an opposition by the state elites in the beginning. The organization of an *iftarat* Prime Minister's Office on 11th January 1996 to be joined by leaders of a group of religious orders and communities was a critical event in the process. The organization was taking place at a time when there was a growing contempt about *Ajzimendis* due to their protests against secularism and Atatürk.¹¹ On 1st August 1996, 13 lieutenants and sergeants were removed from the army due to their links with religious reactionary activities as the first of a list of actions taken. The Commander of the Turkish Naval Forces Güven Erkaya was expressing the army's accumulated concerns about religious reactionism as follows:

A state of chaos emerges if the laws are not applied in this country. It undermines the foundations of the state of law. You may not like certain provisions of the constitution, but you have to obey them as long as the constitution is in force... Article 24 of the Constitution declares one cannot defend a sharia state. It is our natural right to expect the representatives to act according to their oaths. The representatives of a party are advocating a sharia regime outright. I find it extremely dangerous for the representatives of a party in government to do so in terms of secular republic.¹²

4. Sincan Events and Secularist Reaction

With tensions rising this way, the famous Sincan events prompted the leading actor of the state elites, the military, to political intervention on 28th February 1997. The night was organized by the Mayor of Sincan District, Bekir Yıldız, in Ankara on 2nd February 1997 to protest Israel.

⁹Vural Savaş, *İddianame* (The Bill of Indictment), see in URL http://www.belgenet.com/dava/rpdava_idd.html (May 21 1997).

¹⁰Savaş, (May 21, 1997).

¹¹Ergün Poyraz, 2007. *Kanlı Abdest Alanlar* (Those Who Take Wudu with Blood), (Istanbul: Togan Yayınları, 2007), pp. 321, 397; *Sabah*, January 11, 1997. "Erbakan'ın Özel İftarına Tepki" (Reaction to Erbakan's Special İftar).

¹²Sedat Ergin, August 23, 1997. "Tarikat İftarı Bardağı Taşır" (İftar with Religious Order Leaders Became the Last Straw), *Hürriyet*.

The program, which was joined by the Ambassador of Iran, turned to calls for sharia regime and symbolic attacks against the symbols of secularism in Turkey. Events were brought to the attention of the public by a heavily critical secularist media campaign. Waiting until the monthly National Security Council Meeting, the generals presented a list of resolutions on 28th February 1997, to be signed and adopted by Prime Minister Erbakan against religious reactionism. In the meeting, political Islam was stated to be the most serious threat to Turkey's national security, secularist constitutionalism and democracy. The list included 18 resolutions parts of which included (1) the closure of unofficial Koran courses, (2) a freeze on the appointment of members of the Welfare Party to the civil service, (3) inspection of bank accounts belonging to religious communities and orders, and (4) prohibition of the headscarf in schools and universities. Erbakan was urged by the military to take action against militant religious organizations and he was informed that the army would take the duty on itself in case of his reluctance or failure.

4.1. The Reception of the Reaction by the WP

Soon after the military memorandum, the movement was introduced to a process of discursive de-Islamization assuming a consensual and moderate posture. The beginnings of this process could be seen as early as Necmettin Erbakan's responses to criticisms by the generals during the National Security Council Meeting on 28 February 1997. Erbakan was trying to assure the generals by saying, "we are respectful of secular democracy."¹³ He was going on, "We have received the necessary message from this meeting."¹⁴ And after the meeting, "We have made the decisions together. We are in agreement with Turkish armed forces. We are in consensus."¹⁵ The mood of this early response by Erbakan was preserved in the aftermath. During a party group meeting held in the parliament a week after, Erbakan was saying that WP would not provide sanctuary to "radical groups."¹⁶ In a talk with the leader of the Motherland Party, Mesut Yılmaz, Erbakan was saying, "Turkey is a democratic and secular state... Neither democracy nor secularism can be given up."¹⁷

This was followed by the introduction of a campaign of suppression in the party against the radicals. As a beginning, Şevki Yılmaz and Hasan Hüseyin Ceylan were invited to the Office of Prime Minister by Erbakan to be cautioned not to increase the tension and to refrain from provocative actions.¹⁸ In opposition to a speech by İbrahim Halil Çelik which stated that Turkey would turn to Algeria and Iran in case of the prohibition of headscarf, Erbakan was responding:

Everybody must know that Turkey will not become an Algeria or Iran. Turkey is a democratic country. Democracy is settled here. Law is settled here. Turkey is a secular country. WP is the guarantor of secularism.¹⁹

Erbakan was supported by the moderates in the party. One of the intellectual founders of the Just Order program, Süleyman Akdemir, was stating that:

WP is occupied by some people like Hasan Hüseyin Ceylan and Şevki Yılmaz who think that Islam is about male-turban (sarık) and frock (cübbe). Either the WP will be a centrist party or the radicals will capture the party... Turkey needs packages of negotiation, secularism, human rights and justice...²⁰

Erbakan was similarly disturbed with radical remarks of some party members on issues of male-turban, frock, headscarf and Imam-Hatip schools.²¹ An order of interrogation was issued by the party against Şevki Yılmaz for the purpose.

¹³ *Milliyet*. March 3, 1997. "RP'nin Sivil Destek Arayışı" (WP's Search for Civilian Support).

¹⁴ Evren Değer March 2, 1997. "Komutanlar Erbakan'ı Başbakan'a Şikayet Etti" (Commanders Complained Erbakan to the Prime Minister), *Milliyet*.

¹⁵ *Sabah*. March 3, 1997. "Erbakan: MGK İstişari Organdır" (Erbakan: NSC is a Consultative Assembly).

¹⁶ *Milliyet*, March 5, 1997. "Erbakan: Bildiri Yumuşatılacak" (Erbakan: The Declaration will be Mitigated).

¹⁷ *Milliyet*. March 6, 1997. "Erbakan: MGK İstişari bir Organ" (Erbakan: NSC is a Consultative Organ).

¹⁸ *Milliyet*. March 7, 1997. "MGK Bildirisi Başbakanlıkta" (National Security Council Resolutions are in the Office of Prime Minister).

¹⁹ *Sabah*. May 14, 1997. "Türkiye Ne İnan Olur Ne Cezayir" (Turkey will not be an Iran nor Algeria).

²⁰ *Milliyet*. March 26, 1997. "RP'nin Beyin Takımı Huzursuz" (WP's Brain Cadres are Disturbed).

²¹ *Milliyet*. April 16, 1997. "26 Nisan Endişesi" (Concerns before 26th April).

4.2. The WP Closure Case and Defense

Despite the cooperative and conciliatory attitude adopted by the WP in response to the reaction of the armed forces, the events followed by the opening of a closure case against the Welfare Party. The Bill of Indictment submitted by the Public Prosecutor of the Court of Cassations to the Constitutional Court VuralSavaş listed a number of accusations against the party with a call for the closure of the party on account of violating secularism. The first accusation was about the introduction of a parliamentary bill by the party for the abolition of the headscarf ban. The second was some provocative speeches made by various party members inviting the public to the abolition of secularism, introduction of sharia regime, and preparation for armed resistance. The third accusation was the reluctance of Welfare Party Government to take action against these anti-secularist campaigns. And the fourth was that the Welfare Party was opening new faculties of theology and Imam-Hatip schools over the needs.²²

The WP defense presented to the Constitutional Court against the accusations directed in the bill of indictment became a critical document for the prospects of party change that would follow. The whole defense was devoted to prove that the WP was one of the most loyal actors of secularism and so would it be in the future. Though the Constitutional Court was not persuaded by the arguments presented, the defense was an expression of a serious commitment of WP's loyalty to secularism to be pursued then, and in the future, for the reason that the failure to do so would potentially lead to the upsurge of similar problems.

A solemn statement was given in the defense which stated, "WP is the real defender and guarantor of the secularist principle of the constitution." Accordingly, this principle was reiterated with repetition in all the speeches made by WP deputies, both within and outside the assembly:

To act against secularism is acting according to scholastic thinking. It is very dogmatic and scholastic for a person to apply pressure on others by saying that our religion orders this way and you have to obey us. We don't want such things in this country.²³

In addition to these, some party members were taken under surveillance due to their radical speeches. Şevki Yılmaz and Hasan Hüseyin Ceylan were removed from the party on 20th June 1997 for this purpose. Despite all the attempts, the Public Prosecutor of the Court of Cassations Savaş Vural was however found justified in his accusations. The process concluded with the closure of the Welfare Party on 16th January 1998, for turning to a center for anti-secularist movements. The deputyship of Necmettin Erbakan, Şevket Kazan, Ahmet Tekdal, Şevki Yılmaz, Hasan Hüseyin Ceylan and İbrahim Halil Çelik was abolished and they were prohibited from political life. All the properties of the Party were to be transferred to the Treasury.²⁴

5. The Virtue Party

As a precaution against a potential closure of the Welfare Party, a new party was established on 17th December 1997, with the name Fazilet Partisi (Virtue Party) by İsmail Alptekin. With the closure of the WP on 16th January 1998, all the non-banned representatives of the WP moved to Virtue Party (VP), and Recai Kutan was brought to the leadership on 14th May 1998. One of the most important priorities of the VP on its establishment was to emphasize its difference from the WP, particularly on those areas which could bring it into conflict with the state elites. The actions which led to the closure of WP were noted and a very serious commitment was made not to repeat them. In his speech during the First Party Congress held on 14th May 2000, Kutan was remarking that no belief, opinion or conviction would dominate in the country during the VP government, and he was going on: "We consider this as a natural outcome of the republican values of democracy, secularism and rule of law."²⁵ In another speech he made, Kutan was saying:

²²Vural, (May 21 1997)

²³ Refah Partisi (Welfare Party), *Savunma* (Defense). (Ankara: Refah Partisi, August 4-6, 1997).

²⁴ Constitutional Court, *Anayasa Mahkemesi Gerekçeli Karar: Refah Partisinin Kapatılması* (Detailed Ruling of the Constitutional Court Pertaining to the Closure of the Welfare Party), (February 22, 1998) in *Belge.Net*:

http://www.belgenet.com/dava/rpdava_g01.html; Constitutional Court. Anayasa Mahkemesi Kısa Karar (Short Ruling of the Constitutional Court), (January 16, 1998) in *Belge.Net*: http://www.belgenet.com/dava/rpdava_karar.html.

²⁵ Recai Kutan, May 14, 2000. "Fazilet Partisi Birinci Olağan Kongresi Açılış Konuşması" (Virtue Party First Party Congress Opening Speech), *NTVMSNBC*

Everybody will be free in their beliefs. No one will be subjected to any pressure for his beliefs. The state will be equidistant to all religions. The source of the laws issued in the parliament will be science and reason.²⁶

In an interview conducted by David Rockefeller, Kutan stated, “The VP is aiming to integrate secularism, democracy, religious and moral values.”²⁷ A solemn declaration was released by party leader Recai Kutan to indicate that the VP was not a continuation of the WP. In 2001, when he was evaluating the NSC decisions on combating religious reactionism, Kutan was stating: “Religious reactionism is one of the most important problems in the country.” He was going on to say that whoever tried to suspend democracy and freedoms by trying to turn them to what they were in history is a religious reactionary (an *irticaci*).²⁸

A notable sign of the VP goal to dissociate itself from WP politics was the attempt of Recai Kutan to end Erbakan’s influence in the party as well as the Just Order program he propagated. Kutan was expressing his distaste with Erbakan’s directives about the nomination of Merve Kavakçı as candidate, and then his encouragement to Kavakçı to give her loyalty oath in the assembly with headscarf. Kutan was rebelling by saying, “That is too much. If they decide something, they must ask us as well,” and he was adding: “It (Kavakçı’s attempt) was a very unnecessary behavior. It was very indecent.”²⁹ While opposing Erbakan’s attempts to rule the party from outside, Kutan was declaring the end of the traditional Just Order discourse promoted by Erbakan as well. Kutan was saying that “We don’t use the concept of Just Order. There is no such thing... It was an academic debate... We are moving away from the Just Order slogan.”³⁰

While Kutan was trying to avoid problems with the state elites, there were some other party members like Nazlı Ilıcak who were known for their activities exemplifying a clear break from the traditional policy foundations of the movement. Ilıcak organized a reception in her manor in the honor of Recai Kutan during which the guests were presented wine. In an account by the reporter of Daily Telegraph, the wine was pouring like water in the reception. Ilıcak was saying that the VP did not have any goals to introduce a sharia regime and that’s why she was in that party.³¹

To keep the channels of communication with the army open, while preparing the VP’s updated program, Kutan sent a letter to the Chief of General Staff to get his opinion about issues he could be concerned about. Kutan stated, “The VP is the most loyal party to the laws and the constitution.”³² This process was supported by the overall VP electorate too. In a nationwide survey conducted by VP, the people were asked the most reliable institution in Turkey, and interestingly, for 47 percent of the people who said they would vote for VP in next elections, the army was the most reliable institution in Turkey.³³ Kutan was promising that the mistakes committed by the WP during prior electoral campaigns would not be repeated by the VP. For this reason, party members who would join in the campaigns for April 1999 election as speakers and managers were provided education and seminars on secularism and democracy. Kutan’s speech booklets were to be used as a basis for the purpose, and the main subjects the speakers were to emphasize with insistence were: democracy, secularism, human rights, freedoms, rule of law, economy and foreign policy.³⁴

The friendly approach displayed by some WP deputies towards Israel and the Jews was a remarkable development in the process. During a visit to USA, an assembly of VP deputies including Recai Kutan, Abdullah Gül, Ali Coşkun and Temel Karamollaoğlu were meeting with members of the Jewish lobby in the USA, the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee, the American Jewish Committee, Presidents of Conference of American Jewish Organizations etc..³⁵

²⁶ *Sabah*. “Amerikaile Barışma Gezisi” (Visit for Peace to America), (November 2, 1999).

²⁷ *Sabah*. “Rockefeller Sordu Kutan Cevapladi” (Rockefeller Asks and Kutan Answers), (October 23, 1999)

²⁸ *Sabah*. “Fazilet’te ‘Şerefe’ Krizi” (Cheers Crisis in Virtue Party), (April 12, 2001).

²⁹ *Sabah*. “Kutan İsyan Etti” (Kutan Rebelled), (May 4, 1999).

³⁰ Fatih Çekirge. “Adil Düzenden Çark” (Reversal from Just Order), *Sabah* (July 11, 1998).

³¹ *Sabah*. “FP’de Şaraplı Yemek” (Reception with Wine in Virtue Party), (June 6, 1998).

³² *Sabah*. “28 Şubat Aynı Şiddetle Devam Ediyor” (28th February Process Goes on with the Same Rigidity), (March 28, 1999).

³³ *Sabah*. “FP’liler de Ordu Dedi” (VP Supporters too Vote for the Army), (August 25, 1998).

³⁴ *Hürriyet*. “FP’li Hatiplere Laiklik Dersi” (Secularism Lessons to Virtue Party Speakers), (February 8, 1999).

³⁵ *Sabah*, (2 November 1999)

And in a similar incident, VP leader Recai Kutan was clinking the glasses with Israeli Minister of foreign affairs Simon Peres. This was a notable deviation from traditional National View anti-Israeli sentiment which regarded Israel as expansionist, oppressive and aggressive.³⁶

The process of moderation and cooperation initiated by the 28th February military reaction and the closure of the WP was not found enough by the judiciary, however. The VP was brought to court by the Public Prosecutor with an accusation that the party was a continuation of the WP, and that it violated secularism with provocative actions and speeches by its members on the headscarf issue. The Public Prosecutor was found justified by the Constitutional Court not for the former, but for the latter accusations, and a verdict was ruled for the closure of the VP and introduction of political bans for a number of party members.³⁷ The ouster of what could be called as the group of radicals in the party including Merve Kavakçı, Bekir Sobacı and Ramazan Yenidedeserved as a structural modification from outside to move the party closer towards the center. The lesson drawn from the closure case was that the movement had to be more careful about the sensitivities of the state elites on issues of secularism, and whatever they do on behalf of conservative politics, they had to observe legal and constitutional limits and they had to work in cooperation and coordination with the legal and military members of the state elites.

6. The Justice and Development Party

With the establishment of the Justice and Development Party, the movement is introduced to a greater degree of change approaching further towards the center. Some leading party members like Abdullah Gül were even motivated to move the party somewhere between the right and the left.³⁸ The state elites were instrumental in the process particularly in the intimidation of the religious right from radical policies, in the ensuing process of political socialization, and in the removal of Necmettin Erbakan from the leadership of the movement with all the charismatic and authoritative privileges he enjoyed.

6.1. Secularist Backlash as an Instrument of Moderation

The secularist backlash directed against the movement expressed in the military memorandum and ensuing party closure cases remains as the most influential factor motivating the founders of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) to formulate a more moderate party platform compared to the past. The JDP deputies came to acknowledge more firmly that they had to stay away from clashes with the state elites in order to avoid the troubles experienced by the WP and the VP. The sign of this change was apparent as early as the emergence of the split in the movement between the traditionalists and the reformists.

After the ruling of the Constitutional Court decision for the closure of the VP, to start with, Abdullah Gül was delivering his opinion to the journalists as:

Our party is closed down; past mistakes must not be repeated... What needs to be done at this stage is to make a critique of the past mistakes and then to move towards unity with negotiation, without making any impositions.³⁹

For the new party that the reformists were intended to establish, Gül was saying the party would not be an “ideological” and “marginal” party. He was going on:

We will not be a religionist (dinci) party nor the party of the religious people (dindarlar) only... We believe that there cannot be any democracy without secularism and no secularism without democracy... We don't regard our party as the continuity of the VP... We will not return to the mistakes of the past.⁴⁰

³⁶ Necmettin Erbakan. *Milli Görüş* (National View). (İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 1975), pp. 229-230, 250-254; Necmettin Erbakan, *Türkiye'nin Temel Meseleleri* (Turkey's Major Issues), (Ankara: Rehber Yayıncılık, 1991), p. 201)

³⁷ Constitutional Court. *Anayasa Mahkemesi Fazilet Partisi Hakkındaki Kapatma Kararı* (Constitutional Court Closure Decision for Virtue Party), see in *Belge.Net*: <http://www.belgenet.com/arsiv/fazilet.html> (June 22, 2001).

³⁸ *Hürriyet*. “Yenilikçiler Tüzük için Toplandı” (Reformists Gather for Party Program), (July 12, 2001).

³⁹ *Hürriyet*. “FP Toplantısında Özal Tartışması” (Özal Debate in Virtue Party Meeting), (June 25, 2001).

⁴⁰ *Hürriyet*, (July 12, 2001).

While in the past he was talking like “my reference is Islam” and “democracy is not a purpose, it is an instrument,” the leading reformist in the VP Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was now saying he would not take into account those who pronounced sharia state.⁴¹ Similarly, in a speech he made on his exit from prison in 2000 before the establishment of the JDP, Erdoğan was saying that “We gave up making religious politics decorated with religious motifs and stories; we shall not do any such politics; we will show how the religious people make politics.”⁴² There were other reformists like VP Istanbul representative Mukadder Başeğmez who argued the 28 February Process had indeed made things better. For him, although the secularist reaction was cast in a very undemocratic way, it had been helpful for the turn of the religious right towards recognizing the importance of global and universal political values especially those of them related with gender rights and equality.⁴³

6.2. Impact of Erbakan’s Removal from Politics

Organizationally, the WP and the VP shared many features in common with traditional Islamic political organizations with certain structures and procedures it incorporated, such as: absolute leadership, top-down decision making and stringent disciplinary norms.⁴⁴ Erbakan was placed on top of this structure and there was not much objection to his office until the advance of the 28 February Process.⁴⁵

Erbakan’s prohibition from political activism created a very serious organizational crisis in the movement. The prestigious charismatic leader was ousted and his exceptional authority was suspended. This was the main reason for the emergence of oppositional groups in the party called as the reformists. The reformists were opposed to traditional political methods applied in the party as well as the ineffectiveness of the solutions offered towards challenges.⁴⁶ In line with this, Abdullatif Şener was identifying Abdullah Gül’s candidacy for party leadership of the VP as a search for renovation.⁴⁷ For Erdoğan, Turkey was in search of three things: The first was a change of mindset. Second was structural change and the third was civilization.⁴⁸

According to the innovationists, Erbakan and his close associates were unable to deal with domestic and global crises the party was facing, and when this was coupled with the authoritarian party structure, the party was inevitably driven to failure and defeat. The movement urgently needed to renovate itself in almost all domains, not only in style, but also in policy-making. The organizational structure of the movement had to be changed in favor of a more democratic one that would enable close communication and contact among upper and lower echelons of the party as a major instrument to develop viable policies through the discussion and deliberation of issues and concerns.⁴⁹

7. A Look at the Developments at the Post-28February Process

The tension was at a decline by 2003. The JDP was resolute about not repeating the mistakes. The idea of introducing Islamic law and statehood popular with the National View parties never showed up again in the agenda. Yet there were still some clashes of smaller scale originating from popular secularist reactions and differences in the interpretation of secularism leading to further edging of the party to the view of the state elites – this time in violation of its democratic beliefs maybe.

⁴¹ *Hürriyet*. “Siyasal İslam YolAyrımında” (Political Islam at a Crossroad), (February 8, 2000)

⁴² *Hürriyet*. “Erdoğan: Dinci Siyaset Bıraktık” (Erdoğan: We Gave up Religious Politics), (May 16, 2000)

⁴³ *Hürriyet*. “28 Şubat İyi Oldu” (28th February has been Good), (February 12, 2000)

⁴⁴ See, for example, *Sabah*. “Hoca’nınDediğiOldu” (It happened as Instructed by Hodja), (May 15, 1998). The word hoca, which is translated as hodja here, is a name used for Muslim preachers, Islamic scholars or clergymen usually. Its usage for Erbakan here could be attributed to his leadership to the religious conservative Welfare Party.

⁴⁵ See, for example, *Sabah*. “Akve Kara Seçimi” (Selecting between the Whites and the Blacks), (March 23, 1998)

⁴⁶ *Hürriyet*. “Hoca’nın Elini Öpmeyerek Milat Koydu” (He Set a Milestone by not Kissing Hodja’s Hand), (September 19, 2000).

⁴⁷ *Hürriyet* (9 March 2000).

⁴⁸ Yavuz Donat. “Fazilet Cadı Kazanı” (Virtue is Hot Spot), *Sabah* (July 29, 1999).

⁴⁹ NilgünCerrahoğlu. “SüpermenLiderİstemiyoruz” (We don’t Want a Superman Leader), *Milliyet*(February 22, 1998); *Sabah*. “FP Partiİçerisinde Muhalefet: BöyleGitmez” (Virtue Party Intraparty Opposition: We cannot Continue like This), (May 16, 1998); *Hürriyet*, “Hoca-Tayyip Savaşı” (WarbetweenHodjaand Tayyip), (May 13, 2000).

In 2003, the JDP prepared a bill in the parliament for the education of economically disadvantaged but successful students in private schools with their expenses to be met by the Ministry of Education.⁵⁰ The bill was harshly objected with a counter-campaign by the state elites and it was eventually vetoed by President Necdet Sezer for the reason that it was intended to provide state funds to some private schools whose educational programs contradicted secularist and republican values.⁵¹ The initiative was thus abandoned. In February 2006, the Council of State introduced a headscarf ban on the kindergarten principals prohibiting the use of headscarf during and off the job at the same time. The ban was condemned by Erdoğan as a violation of the secularist principle itself. Accordingly, nobody had the right to intervene in the private life of the citizens by offending the freedom of religion and conscience.⁵² For Abdullah Gül, the ban was inhibiting Turkey's road to greater democracy. "Turkey is supposed to meet with greater freedoms and democracy with a much broader space for civil society."⁵³

Another important event was the opposition against Abdullah Gül's presidential candidacy. The secularists were in protests in major cities, calling for a more modern president – referring to the headscarf worn by Abdullah Gül's wife and his previous membership in the National View. Gül was rebelling against the reactions by saying that he was always careful about observing secularism and he was never engaged in an anti-secular activity all through his career nor was he ever brought to the courtyard for the matter.⁵⁴ Gül won the elections in the parliament, but this time the RPP applied to the Constitutional Court for the cancellation of the elections with a claim that the election of the president was requiring the participation of 2/3 of the parliament in the elections.⁵⁵ And in support of the RPP, the military issued a memo through the website of the Office of the Chief of General Staff saying that the military would take a direct action itself unless the elections were cancelled. Eventually, the Constitutional Court decided to cancel the presidential elections.⁵⁶

A more important clash took place after the introduction of a constitutional amendment, with a united action by the Nationalist Action Party and the JDP, for the repeal of the headscarf ban at universities. The argument of the parties was that the headscarf ban violated the equality principle. All citizens of the country were able to benefit from the public services on equal basis and the right to higher education was not to be denied for reasons not explicitly defined by the law.⁵⁷ The initiative met with a warning by the Public Prosecutor of the Supreme Court, Abdurrahman Yalçınkaya, against the NAP and the JDP which said that they would face a closure case unless they dropped the program. Yet they went ahead with the voting of the amendment which was accepted with a sizable majority. The RPP and the DLP subsequently applied to the Constitutional Court for the cancellation of the amendment. The court agreed with them by declaring that the amendment was in violation of the secularism.⁵⁸ The events were followed by Abdurrahman Yalçınkaya filing a closure case against the party with an accusation that the party turned into a center of anti-secularist activities. According to the Public Prosecutor, the JDP was trying to change the secular and democratic character of the state with such attempts and policies as the removal of the headscarf ban, occupation of the public offices with their party members, introduction of some Islamic norms in the legal and administrative system and discrimination against the non-religious people.⁵⁹

⁵⁰Turkish Grand National Assembly, July 4, 2003: Bill No. 4967.

⁵¹The issue is brought to the agenda back in 2006 with another bill (No. 5545) by the parliament under the name of "service purchases from private incorporations" yet to be vetoed by President Necdet Sezer again for similar reasons.

⁵²*Hürriyet*. February 11, 2006. "Başbakan: Danıştayın Kararını Kınıyorum (The Prime Minister: I Condemn the Decision of the Council of State).

⁵³*Hürriyet*. February 11, 2006. "Gül: Türban Kararı Tehlikeli (Gül: The Decision on Headscarf is Dangerous)."

⁵⁴*Zaman*. April 30, 2007. "Gül'den Cumhuriyet Gazetesine Yalanlama (Gül Denies the Accusations in (Daily Newspaper) Cumhuriyet).

⁵⁵Özbudun and Gençkaya argue that the claim of the RPP was groundless because the 1982 constitution did not require any such rule. The presidential candidate would fail only if he was not able to receive the necessary ratio of votes determined for each round. The action was thus in a nature of interrupting the democratic process. Ergun Özbudun and Ömer F. Gençkaya, *Democratization and the Politics of Constitution-Making in Turkey* (Budapest & New York: Central European University Press, 2009), pp. 97-99; Ergun Özbudun, "Why the Crisis over the Presidency," *Private View* (Autumn 2007), pp. 48-50.

⁵⁶Constitutional Court Decision, 2007/54.

⁵⁷Özbudun and Gençkaya, (2009), p. 107

⁵⁸Constitutional Court Decision, 2008/116.

⁵⁹ Abdurrahman Yalçınkaya, *AKP Kapatma Davası İddianamesi* (JDP Bill of Indictment for Closure), (Presented to the Constitutional Court), March 14, 2008.

The JDP did not accept the accusations offered in the Bill of Indictment, however: The JDP was rather the guarantor and insurance of secularism in Turkey and the party was in full compliance with the secularist principle since its establishment. The JDP was never engaged in any attempts that could be interpreted as introducing religious norms in public life. According to the JDP, the Public Prosecutor was unnecessarily strict in his interpretation of secularism to the extent of restricting the freedom of religion, belief and conscience brought by secularism and democracy. Secularism was not to be understood as the separation of religion and state merely. JDP's parliamentary attempt to remove the headscarf ban was indeed a service to secularism and these kind of initiatives could never have been portrayed as attempts to establish an Islamic sharia regime.⁶⁰

The Constitutional Court found the Public Prosecutor justified in his accusations. However, the closure demand was rejected. The party was ruled a financial sanction with a cut of the 50 percent of the funds that it receives from the Treasury. The unavoidable lesson taken from the closure case was that the JDP had to remove the issues of headscarf and Imam-Hatip schools from its agenda in its totality while it was always careful about more serious issues of Islamic law and statehood. It was understood that the judiciary expected the parties to follow up its particular secularist interpretation no matter how it appeared to the rest: Attempts to remove the headscarf ban and equalization of the condition of the Imam-Hatip schools in entering university exams would not be considered legal as part of the freedom of religion, belief and conscience often voiced by the JDP.⁶¹ The JDP has thus made a tacit commitment in this regard since the closure case to which it has been loyal by far as the course of events show.

8. Conclusion

To summarize, the article analyzes the role of the secularist state elites in the change in the political orientation of the Turkish religious right with an in-depth empirical analysis. The movement had started to collect progressively greater ratio of votes since the return of democracy in 1982 yet to be driven to a parallel process of radicalization, evidenced in calls for the introduction of Islamic law and statehood voiced by various party activists. The process was met with a heavy reaction by the state elites expressed in the issuance of the 28 February resolutions, opening of a closure case against the WP and then the VP, and introduction of various political bans of the movement.

The secularist reaction was responded by the religious right with cooperation and understanding to represent the beginning of a gradually strengthening process of ideological moderation. A solemn declaration was released to express the loyalty of the party to secularism in the beginning. During the VP period, a greater effort was paid to meet the expectations of the state elites displayed in the desertion of the fundamentalist political discourse in its totality. This included the removal of radical voices from the party, turning away from such controversial issues as headscarf and Imam-Hatip schools, and the minimization of the influence of Erbakan on the party. Mistakes of the past were noted and a very strong resolution was shown not to be repeat them. The tide of moderation gained greater momentum with the entrance of the JDP to Turkish political life. Acknowledging the reasons for the closure of previous parties, i.e., violation of secularism, the party has been the most careful to embrace the secularist republican foundations of the state and to stay away from the mistakes committed in the past.

⁶⁰ AK Parti (Justice and Development Party), *Savunma ve Ekleri* (Defense and the Supplements 1&2), (Presented to the Constitutional Court), June 16, 2008.

⁶¹ Constitutional Court, *Gerekçeli Karar* (Detailed Ruling), (Published in *Resmi Gazete*), October 24, 2008.