The Rise of Nationalist Action Party and Turkish Politics

BÜLENT ARAS and GÖKHAN BACIK

The Nationalist Action Party (NAP) finished second in the April 1999 Turkish parliamentary elections, with 18 per cent of the total vote. The NAP's unprecedented success came as a surprise to Turkish political life. Even the top leaders of the NAP had not anticipated such a resounding success, at least a 100 per cent increase in performance over the previous elections of 1995. This electoral success led many experts to comment that Turkish politics is shifting to nationalist radicalism. This triumph of the NAP, however, in our view, is a product of the events of Turkish political life since 1997. Over this short period of time, Turkey's political system has witnessed a broad set of extraordinary events that have brought a new power configuration to the forefront. This new political atmosphere validated the NAP's ideological compromise between conflicting demands of nationalist, Islamist and secularist positions in the Turkish political system.

The Nationalist Action Party (NAP) – widely known as the Greywolves or Idealists – finished second in the April 1999 Turkish parliamentary elections, with 18 per cent of the total vote. The NAP also achieved considerable success in simultaneously-held municipal elections. In previous elections, the NAP had remained below the national limit of ten per cent of the popular vote that would have entitled them to a role in the Turkish parliament. The NAP's unprecedented success came as a surprise to Turkish political life. Even the top leaders of the NAP had not anticipated such a resounding success, at least a 100 per cent increase in performance over the previous elections of 1995. This electoral success led many experts to comment that Turkish politics is shifting to nationalist radicalism.

The NAP's increasing power brought party identity to a state of flux. It faces many difficult challenges in the important role that it now plays in Turkish political life, especially after forming a partnership with the Democratic Leftist Party of Bülent Ecevit. This triumph of the NAP, however, in our view, is a product of the events of Turkish political life since 1997. Over this short period of time, Turkey's political system has witnessed a broad set of extraordinary events that have brought a new power configuration to the forefront. This new political atmosphere validated the

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NAP's ideological compromise between conflicting demands of nationalist, Islamist and secularist positions in the Turkish political system. The nationalist triumph in these last elections must be understood against this background. In what follows, we explore the victory of the NAP in the April 1999 elections, the reasons for its success, the leadership's change of party image, the failures of other parties, the shift of votes to the nationalists and also the vision and practice of the NAP. We will also question the NAP's potential and shortcomings to provide a coherent political project with particular emphasis on the role of religion, the Kurdish question and the party's relation to the state.

A Short History

On 23 February 1963, Alparslan Türkeş returned from exile. He and the other members of 'the fourteen' had kept in touch despite the fact that they had been forced to settle in different parts of the world. Important members of the fourteen, such as Dündar Taşer and Muzaffer Özdağ, with the guidance of Türkeş, participated in the Republican Peasant National Party's (RPNP) (Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi, CMKP) congress of 1965. It became obvious that their aim was to take over this small party and to reorganize it according to their own political ideology. Türkeş soon became the general inspector of the party and his important status gave him the opportunity to reshape the party according to his own vision. The RPNP, which had won 1.4 per cent of the total vote in the 1961 general elections, was, nevertheless, very weak in that period and many of its supporters gave up all hope of any greater successes in coming elections. Türkeş, during his inspections, visited nearly all of the local branches of the party, giving the party new impetus and inspiration. Consequently, Türkeş was elected as the new chairman of the RPNP during a special congress held on 1 August 1965. His close friends were also elected to important positions in the party. Another noteworthy change that soon took place was in the name of the party, which would become the Nationalist Action Party (NAP) as a result of its 1969 party congress.

The RPNP (later the NAP) did not become an extremely popular party among nationalists, however, due to the conflicting views within the party over issues concerning the party's programme and organization. In the 1969 elections, the NAP won only 3.03 per cent of the vote, although Türkeş was elected as a deputy to the National Assembly. The party's situation would improve in the 1970s, however, and, despite continuing intra-group conflicts, the NAP began to reflect its determination to represent nationalist opinions and ideals. In the elections of 1973, the NAP won 3.4 per cent of the vote and sent three deputies to the National Assembly. Support
continued to increase and in the 1977 general elections the NAP garnered 6.4 percent of the vote.

Following the military coup of 1980, the military junta closed down the NAP on 16 October 1981. As a result, a great fragmentation occurred in the party base and many important members joined other new parties that were in formation, such as the Motherland Party of Turgut Özal. While this was happening, Türkeş was in detention, which lasted for almost 5 years. In an attempt to prevent further fragmentation of the party base, however, and to gather all nationalists under a common party flag, several important nationalists established the Conservative Party (CP) (Muhafazakar Parti) with the permission of Türkeş. The military junta, however, with its famous ‘number 100 decision’ refused to recognize 25 of the party’s founders. The CP was not able to enter any elections due to obstacles created by the prevailing military regime. In 1985, the congress of the CP changed its name to the Nationalist Working Party (NWP).

Türkeş, after he was freed from detention on 4 October 1987, joined the NWP and was elected the new chairman. The NWP, in its first electoral experience in the elections of November 1987, won 2.91 per cent of the vote. This was, of course, a long way from the 6.4 per cent of the vote that they had garnered in the 1977 elections. Türkeş, before the elections of October 1991, joined in an electoral alliance with the Welfare Party in order to be able to break the national electoral threshold of 10 per cent. In this tactical alliance, the NWP candidates were enlisted as members of the Welfare Party and 18 of them were elected to Parliament.

After the 1980 coup, however, Türkeş lost strict control over the party. The most important fragmentation occurred on 8 July 1992. Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu, a former nationalist youth leader and Sivas deputy of the NWP, left the party along with five of their friends. Yazıcıoğlu then founded the Grand Unity Party. The main reason for this fragmentation was a conflict over the definition of nationalism. According to Yazıcıoğlu and his associates, the NWP was departing too far from the principles of Islam. Yazıcıoğlu claimed that the NWP had strayed from its historically designated path and was being governed by personal ambitions. The NAP was re-established in 1992 when the National Assembly adopted a bill that lifted the ban on the use of political party names that pre-dated the 1980 military coup.

An Expected Result, or a Gift from Political Islam?

There were various reasons for the unprecedented success of the NAP in the elections of April 1999; some planned, others unplanned. After the death of legendary founding-father and political veteran Alparslan Türkeş, the NAP
gained 18.2 per cent of the total vote and became the second party of the country. The main reasons that led to this triumph were the NAP's political stance during the so-called 28 February Process, the factors that served to foster nationalist sentiment in the country, and the sense of frustration by conservatives over the experience of the coalition led by the Welfare Party.

The NAP's political isolation from the well-defined power blocs of Turkish political life increased following the critical meeting of the National Security Council on 28 February 1997. Heretofore the NAP had been locked out of parliament, since the total number of votes for the party in previous elections fell short of the 10 per cent national threshold required for Parliamentary representation. This helped the administrative cadres of the party distance themselves from the severe conflicts that occurred among the other political parties over important issues related to religion, democracy, and secularism. The Turkish political system has experienced a sharpening of power relations over the last few years, which led to the closure of Islamist Welfare Party and continuous interventions of the military in political life. The NAP has been highly successful in creating a new, less conflictual party image, and concentrating almost exclusively on serious nationwide concerns like corruption and terrorism and almost never getting involved in non-constructive domestic tensions.

Since the military coup of 1980, nothing has been as divisive in Turkish political life as the National Security Council decisions of 28 February 1997. Following the critical National Security Council meeting, the army re-emphasized its supremacy over political life. In response to the growing strength of the True Path Party–Welfare Party coalition that was in power, it became clear that the Turkish army was becoming extremely anxious about the policies of the government. According to Ben Lombardi, due to various policies of the pro-Islamic members of this coalition, like the speeches denouncing the secular values of the republic, 'the factors that had led to the [former] three coups clearly re-emerged'. These factors were all related to the growing political role of Islam, which was perceived in military circles as a direct challenge to Atatürk's legacy. The military had already begun to apply pressure on the Islamic-led government and to constrain it. In the routine yet critically important meeting mentioned above, the military officially declared Islamic movements to be the most dangerous threat to the secular system and they revised the famous National Security Policy Document (the so-called Red Booklet) according to their perceptions of this new threat. A period of pseudo-military rule began in Turkey. Military authorities began to intervene directly with respect both to foreign policy and to important decisions to be made in domestic politics, and soon the coalition government was forced to resign.

The Turkish military sees itself as the intrepid defender of the republic,
the guardian of the secular Turkish regime. The strength of the military, in part, is derived from the respect that it has long commanded in the political culture of the Turkish people. The military also enjoys a most effective status in political life despite the constitution. The National Security Council, in which the number of civilian members is smaller than the number of military members, can easily determine the main agendas of the Turkish government if it so chooses. Governments rarely reject the suggestions of this council, even though it is only seen as an advisory institution according to law. It is important to mention that the concerns of this council are not only limited to the security issues of the country, but are also concerned with education, the economy, and even tourism.

The new power configuration emerged as a struggle between two political blocs, those who support the 28 February Process and those who do not. According to this division, on the one side, there are the former partners of the ousted coalition, the True Path Party and the Welfare Party, joined by a small Islamic-nationalist faction of the Grand Union Party that supports this anti-military bloc. On the other side are the Democratic Leftist Party, the Motherland Party, and the Republican People’s Party, which serve as the vanguard of the secular establishment and have sided with the military. Although its position was somewhat vague, the NAP also criticized decisions of the former government, especially the Welfare Party. Probably due to the party’s weak position at that time, the secular bloc paid little attention to the NAP. The NAP was not in a position to offer much help to the secular bloc, which was in search of new allies to form a new coalition government. Eventually, the military government had to force some deputies to resign from the True Path and Welfare Parties in order to attain the support that was necessary to dominate the Parliament.\(^{10}\)

It is important to bear in mind the fact, however, that the NAP did not participate in or encourage the implementation of severe acts of repression against groups considered to be reactionary. The previous government had put into place limits concerning religious education and religious dress codes which were resented by conservative voters, causing a large number of traditional conservative followers of the Motherland Party to shift their allegiance to the NAP.\(^{11}\) The NAP leadership delivered pointed messages to their voters about the issues at stake during the election campaign. NAP leader, Devlet Bahçeli, for example, had openly promised to solve the headscarf crisis in the conservative provinces of Anatolia, especially Çorum, Yozgat, and Sivas.

The Virtue Party (a reincarnation of the Welfare Party)\(^{12}\) only captured 15–16 per cent of the total vote in the spring election. Comparing this with the 22.43 per cent of the vote received by the Welfare Party in 1995 helps to explain the unexpected victory of the NAP. The shift of allegiance from
the Virtue Party to the NAP was especially critical. Many voters who had voted for the Welfare Party in the 1995 elections changed their mind because of a deep frustration, turning towards the NAP as a result of the decline in religious freedom that followed the experience of the Welfare Party. Due to fatal mistakes on the part of its leadership, the Virtue Party was abandoned by a large number of conservative voters. It would be incorrect, however, to draw the conclusion from the new political scene that the 28 February Process had been successful in persuading the conservative-Islamic masses to quit their religious-oriented political opinions. On the contrary, the voters’ landslide shift from the Virtue Party to the NAP demonstrates a strategic move on their part rather than a renunciation of principle.

Despite the decrease in votes for the Virtue Party, however, the municipalities of Istanbul and Ankara, the two biggest cities of the country, remained in the hands of mayors of the Virtue Party. In light of the picture that has been drawn so far, it seems safe to conclude that because of the decline in religious freedom that resulted from the 28 February Process, a large bloc of conservative voters decided to give the NAP a chance, just as they had done with the Welfare Party four years previously. This political atmosphere validated the NAP’s ideological compromise between Islamic values and the secular-modern position of secularists. It favoured an Anatolian Islam, which is a synthesis of different practices of Islam that appeared in Anatolia. This strategic placement of Islam in its discourse created a chance to offer an alternative solution to the problems that occurred during Islamist party rule in Turkey. From this perspective, it could be said that that the NAP inherited a bloc of votes from the base of the Virtue/Welfare Party because of the failure of the Welfare Party, which had made millions of conservative people politically homeless.

There have been several recent internal and external developments that have served to augment nationalist sentiment in Turkey. The exclusion of Turkey from the European Union in a humiliating manner was the most important external factor. In addition, the policies of European Union countries towards Turkey, especially Italy – with respect to the Abdullah Öcalan crisis – have also damaged the image of the West in the eyes of ordinary conservatives and traditionalists. It is especially noteworthy that the NAP leader, Bahçeli, after his electoral victory, noted that: ‘Turkey has other alternatives and opportunities. Therefore, it is not right to think only in one dimension’. The problematic nature of Turkey–EU relations, especially surrounding the problem of Abdullah Öcalan, promoted the NAP in the eyes of the public. The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) terrorism in the eastern provinces of Turkey almost led to a Vietnam-syndrome, deeply injuring the Turkish people, and the NAP was very successful at elevating
their discourse concerning this problem to the centre of the party programme.

NAP was successful in generating the feeling in the Turkish community that it was the only party that could solve the problems associated with terrorism problems. The apprehension and trial of the leader of the PKK fostered a great deal of nationalist sentiment in Turkey and NAP cadres successfully converted this rising nationalist passion into political support. Although the Turkish media did not give as much space to NAP propaganda as it did to the two major parties of the right – the Motherland Party and the True Path party – the funerals of those killed in the struggle against the PKK helped to foster nationalist sentiment that the NAP proved especially capable of exploiting.

One need only observe the ceremonies associated with sending young people to obligatory military service in order to observe the heights of this nationalist sentiment. The relatives and friends of the soldier-candidate sing nationalist songs and repeat nationalist slogans such as, ‘we are here, where is the PKK?’ or ‘no one can divide Turkey and bring down our flag’. Nationalist songs occupied a great deal of space on Turkish television and radio; songs like ‘My Country Turkey’, ‘I Die for my Country’, and ‘Love it or Leave it’, were at the top of the popular charts at the same time that television video-clips were displaying the heroism of Turkish soldiers fighting against the terrorists. The NAP favoured the most radical solution to the problem of the PKK and gave voice to the deep-running sentiments of hate on the part of the Turkish people.

There were numerous factors that helped the NAP in the last election. For example, the new leader of the party, Devlet Bahçeli – who became leader of the party following the death of the long-time leader and founder Alparslan Türkeş – was highly successful in creating a new image for the party. The party had suffered from allegations that some of its cadres had been involved in Watergate-type scandals and mafia activities. Bahçeli, however, was very successful in excluding from power those who had been suspected of involvement in ‘dirty’ business. Furthermore, the NAP created an image of being a centrist party and downplayed its earlier emphasis on ultranationalist and extremist views.

Broad sectors of Turkish society have come to consider politics as a dirty business that only serves media-patrons, bureaucrats, and politicians. The so-called Susurluk crisis of 1996, for example, helped to reveal how some government officials allegedly aided wanted assassins and gangs in return for their underground services. Subsequent investigations found that some politicians, bureaucrats, and even police and military officers, were directly or indirectly involved in the Susurluk crisis. There is increasing public suspicion that over the last two or three decades illegal forces have been
involved in political assassinations, and financed through illegal channels, such as traffic in drugs and arms. These allegations have been followed by speculation that leaders of centre-right parties were involved in this chain of mafia-style activities. Media bosses had distanced themselves from the NAP and only drew closer to the party after it became clear that the party had a good chance of exceeding the nationwide threshold of ten per cent. All of this helped to create a new vision of the party that steered clear of dirty politics. The failures of other parties of the right and their continuous media wars with each other, supported by competing media cartels, greatly irritated the Turkish people and helped to enhance the appeal of the NAP's slogan 'a new party, a new leader'.

Party Identity: Vision and Practice

Party identity can be defined as the image that citizens have in mind when they think about that party. Political parties change or develop their identities according to the fluctuations that occur over time and as a result of singularly important events. It is clear that becoming part of the government has a major impact on a political party, which then identifies itself ever more closely with the state. In general, all parties hold popular and sometimes irrational sentiments concerning their political identities. The initial experience of governing, however, serves to constrain the extreme sentiments that exist within political parties. This is particularly true in developing countries, where states generally have a strong central bureaucracy with a deeply-rooted set of values, independent of changing governments. Generally speaking, the first experience at governing for parties of either the left or the right is more difficult than is the case for parties of the political centre.

In Turkey, each political party must conform to the conditions of the acting bureaucracy before sharing power with it. This helps to explain the crises that occurred in 1997 between the core of the Turkish establishment (the state bureaucracy and military circles) and the Welfare Party. The Welfare Party, because of its political ideology, was not approved by the state, and, therefore, was first forced to leave the government and then was banned.

It is difficult to argue that the NAP has a clear party programme and a distinct vision for Turkey in the twenty-first century. Generally speaking, the party consists of two kinds of groups. One group of Greywolves is highly intellectual, consisting largely of academics and professionals. This group constitutes the ruling or upper strata of the party. The percentage of intellectuals in the NAP is greater than that of other right-wing parties and is comparable only to the Virtue party. Another group consists of the mainstream supporters of the party. These supporters come from various
segments of Turkish society, some with no education beyond secondary school and others with a university education; many are university students. Most of the 2.5 million new voters that used their vote for the first time, supported this party. Most of the new converts to the NAP are young people, generally under 30, with varying levels of education. They follow their leaders through the symbolic rituals, and songs, as well as reading the books and articles of their leading cadres. Despite the attempts of party leaders to reflect a moderate outlook, these young members often appear quite aggressive, sometimes even attacking the followers of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party.

This discussion over the implications of the rise of NAP in Turkey may provide more insight for understanding party vision and practice. With respect to domestic politics, it is almost certain that the struggle against the PKK will be intensified and that attempts to establish a Kurdish party or to voice Kurdish demands in the political arena will not be allowed. The Greywolves have historically defined their 'nationalist self' over and against the danger of the 'communist other' emanating from the Soviet Union during the cold war era. After the collapse of the Soviet empire, PKK terrorism has been substituted as the new other or the new enemy. It is, however, questionable whether this policy will continue to help the NAP to gain support after apprehension of the leader of the PKK and that organization's alleged shift to political struggle.

With respect to the question of Islam, the process of the Turkification of Islam in Turkey has helped give rise to idealistic religious cadres, but their idealists' position is not altogether clear, although they certainly give sympathetic messages to religious people. They advocate a vague Anatolian Islam, which is conciliatory and also a historical solution to all problems that have emerged through the politicization of Islam. Their understanding of Islam reconciles Islamic and nationalist discourses and restricts this Turkish-Islamic synthesis to private and moral domains.18

With respect to economic policy, it is questionable whether, once in power, the NAP would actually favour the ideas of promoting peasantry and the strategy of developmentalism that have been officially advocated on the party's platform. As early as the 1920s, the strategy of creating a native bourgeoisie led to enormous economic growth on the part of some industrialists, who were close to the founding fathers of the republic, thanks to special incentives and protectionist measures. Over the course of time, an organic link emerged between some segments of the state bureaucracy and big industrialists. The will of the state elite to give the upper hand to these giant industrialists in the Turkish economy prevented competition and rendered the political will of the people ineffective and virtually meaningless with respect to the control of economic policy. Any party that
had a desire to come to power would be forced to take the concerns of this ‘industrial base’ into consideration. In the last decade, however, policies oriented towards greater liberalization and a shift to export-oriented industrialization have led to the emergence of new, dynamic, export-oriented industrialists on a small and medium scale, especially in traditionally conservative Anatolian cities. The leadership of the NAP would have to deal with the demands of a rising, conservative, Anatolian bourgeoisie, from which it has received considerable support, while also trying to persuade others that it poses no threat to the economic activities of the giant industrialists and their privileged links with the state.

With respect to foreign policy, the NAP would have to try its best not to grant any concessions in Turkey’s Kurdish policy. One might safely assume that allegations of human rights abuses, coming especially from EU countries, would continue – something which might put the NAP in a difficult position. The NAP’s rise would also encourage a more active Turkish policy in the Balkans and the ex-Soviet, Turkish republics. The NAP’s policy towards the European Union would surely be influenced by their long-time accusation that the EU is trying its best to promote the activities of the PKK on the international agenda, and help that organization to gain a political identity in international politics. In the past, the intellectuals of this party the NAP have regarded the supporters of integration with the European Union as native agents of foreign forces, in the Ottoman period and during the Turkish war of independence. In their view, the EU seeks to create a Kurdish state in Turkish territory, which, of course, they see as a violation of Turkish sovereignty. They strongly favour a unified nation-state and would not consider any proposal that would contradict this fundamental political principle. For this reason, they fully endorse Turkey’s increasing ties with Israel, which is considered to be especially important for promoting Turkey’s national interests in the Middle East. The former leader of the party, Alparslan Türkeş, cultivated close relations with the Jewish population of Turkey and also actively supported close ties with Israel. The assistance of the Jewish lobby in the US in counterbalancing the anti-Turkey political movements of the US Armenian Diaspora, in particular, have led Turkish nationalists to warm up to Israel.

The NAP favors a series of strategic alliances in the regions surrounding Turkey. Among these are friendship and cooperation treaties with the Caucasus, countries in the Middle East, the Balkans, and an East Mediterranean Alliance, to be formed between Turkey, Jordan, Israel, Egypt, and Palestine. In addition to these alliances, the NAP would like to establish a common market among Turkish republics, as part of a Eurasian Project supported by a new ministry dedicated to promoting the interests of the Turkish World. The party leadership is also very strict on the question
of Cyprus. In their eyes, the existence of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is of vital strategic importance for Turkey.

Coming to the present situation, following the April elections, the NAP formed a coalition with the Democratic Left Party (DLP) and the Motherland Party (MP). From the very beginning, it was clear that this would be a problematic alliance for the NAP. Forming a coalition with the DLP, their historic leftist rivals, angered many nationalists. Furthermore, the vice-chairman of the leftist party, during the formation of the coalition, humiliated the NAP by accusing nationalists of joining in the criminal events of the 1970s. Surprisingly, the NAP remained quiet on the issue.

It is important to examine the NAP’s choice for entering into a coalition. Though the choice was clearly unpopular with many members of the party, it was seen as a necessity. The reason was their idea that entering into a coalition with the pro-Islamic Virtue Party would soon, almost undoubtedly, have met with a hardline reaction from elite secular circles, including the Turkish army. This was, of course, a matter of strategic calculation on the part of the upper echelons of the party, who wished to remain in a power-sharing position with the government rather than having the status of opposition to the government.

The NAP, however, was unable to force the inclusion of even one word about religious freedom in the coalition protocol, something that it had promised to champion in the election campaign. Throughout the early months of the existence of the coalition, the NAP has maintained the image of a passive and submissive party; this attitude is visible even in the news bulletins that come out when party cadres make public appearances.

Considering the short period of time that has transpired since the elections, it could be argued that the NAP has found itself in a similar process of political legitimization as that of the Welfare Party five years ago. Despite the self-proclaimed loyalty of the Greywolves to the secular state and the extreme ideological importance of the state to the NAP’s nationalist discourse, it has been difficult for the NAP to endure this legitimacy test at the hands of the state. It is not surprising, however, that this has transpired, because there are still important differences between the prevailing regime and the NAP that could easily lead to conflict. The first troublesome factor, for the state, is the NAP’s view of nationalism. The type of nationalism espoused by the NAP includes some premises that are clearly in tension with officially endorsed nationalism. The nationalism suggested by the constitution is a purely secular one, whereas the NAP’s nationalism, despite alternative interpretations, is heavily tinged with Islamic values. It was precisely this Islamic-oriented discourse that caused the migration of voters from the Virtue Party to the NAP. The ideological orientations of the party bases in conservative Anatolia are very similar to each other, with a
common reference to the glorification of the Ottoman past and Turkish-Islamist tradition. For this reason, the last decade has witnessed frequent shifts from the NAP to what was then the Welfare Party and, more recently, vice versa.

This same issue is also a potential source of conflict within the coalition, due to differences in the versions of nationalism defended by the DLP and the NAP. The DLP interprets its nationalism as largely Kemalist, ethno-linguistic, and territorial, while the NAP advocates a purely Turkish nationalism. Nationalist elites – both in and out of the NAP – advocate a form of Turkish nationalism that goes far beyond the Kemalist territorial nationalism of the DLP and favours cooperation and even integration of what is perceived as the historical land of the Turkish people. The idea of a united Turkestan is very popular among nationalists of various parties and, from their angle, Turkish-speaking people are, in a sense, a single people, ranging from Asia Minor far into Asia proper. Though it brings the notion of transnational loyalties to mind, the NAP’s sense of Turkishness does not seem suitable for a pluralistic civil project in Turkey. The imagined historic Turkish unity includes various Turkish communities but not different ethnic groups in these regions.

One may easily conclude that unless the NAP narrows the gap between its own brand of nationalism and that of official nationalism, suspicion of the party will endure in different branches of state administration, ranging from the central bureaucracy to military circles. The struggle for legitimacy on the part of the NAP is not limited, however, to different perceptions of nationalism. NAP supporters feel themselves to be subject to a broad-based political trial. As noted by Ömer Laçın er, the state has ‘invited’ the NAP to conform itself to the prevailing status quo and not to violate the well-established ‘margins’ of the system.²³

So far, the NAP has demonstrated a pragmatic willingness to pass this test, even at the expense of frustrating its supporters. NAP cadres, even on the day of the party’s election victory, did not permit gathered supporters to shout slogans against the seculars who defended the headscarf prohibition.²⁴ The NAP has been very sensitive to its need to create a conciliatory image. In the face of extremely important and highly controversial events of recent Turkish political life – high level bureaucratic appointments, the suicide attempt of a minister, and mass protests against the government’s policy on social security issues – the NAP has kept silent, avoiding or ignoring these developments.²⁵ The NAP’s attempts to identify itself with the state prevent it from becoming influential, however, in policy-making processes, even in the face of such critical developments. This silence is likely to anger conservative nationalists who had put their trust in the NAP, and who constitute a majority of the NAP’s support base. Clearly, there is a marked ideological difference
between the upper echelons of the party and its followers. In the current political situation, the party leadership and its followers have different agendas, which can later serve only to undermine the party’s base.

Both forming a coalition with a leftist party and the narrow legitimacy base of the Kemalist establishment have forced the NAP to reconstruct its party identity. Since the early 1970s, the NAP has emphasized the importance of Islam as part of the Turkish national heritage as well as of its party identity.26 It has gained power, however, precisely at a time when the government – the state bureaucracy and military circles – are extremely sensitive about the threat of so called ‘reactionary’ (radical Islamic) activities. Furthermore, the NAP is unable to significantly influence the official foreign policy agenda towards the Turkish states of Central Asia due to its limited power in the government. The NAP has been able to obtain only secondarily important ministerial offices in the government, while the Democratic Leftist Party and the Motherland Party share the most important ministries of foreign and domestic affairs. It could be cogently argued that the longevity of the current coalition depends on the ability of the NAP to act within the limits and constraints of the secular system, which, in the long run, will probably prove to be self-destructive for the party.

The NAP is suffering a severe identity-crisis as a party. Conservative deputies may well prove unwilling to grant continuous concessions to their leftist partners, leading to intra-group conflicts both within the coalition and within the party. A new bill introduced to the Parliament concerning foundations, which would have required strict state control over these institutions, was prevented from passing by conservative deputies of the NAP, over their leftist partner’s strong objections. In ‘a unique situation’, however, consonant with the NAP’s policy of loyalty to the system, the headquarters of the party soon after declared that the bill would be approved without any amendments. Despite the protests of conservative deputies, there was simply no other way for the NAP to maintain its power-sharing place in the government. In light of the need for millions of young supporters of the NAP – who worked for and were responsible for the NAP’s victory – to find jobs related to government service, leaving the coalition membership would be a fatal mistake for the party. It is still not certain, however, that the party will be able to overcome the difficulties associated with the kind of ‘nepotist’ measures that it has in mind for the benefit of its cadres. Any alternative initiative that might be seen in an unfavourable light by the secular establishment might steer the NAP on the same course that eventually led to the isolation of the Welfare Party.

The NAP’s victory has been overshadowed by the current critical conditions of Turkish political life. On the basis of their first three months of political experience, it is clear that continued participation in the coalition
will continue to alter the shape of the NAP’s party identity. The NAP clearly prefers a pragmatic policy that demonstrates patience with respect to its political aims, at the same time that it is struggling to keep the supporters of the party in line. An important number of conservative voters preferred the NAP, because they had thought that it would be more courageous and assertive than the Welfare/Virtue Party. The only pragmatic alternative for the NAP, however, in the wake of their electoral success, has been to create a new party image, one which is more secular and less loyal to its conservative base of voters.

Conclusion

The future of the NAP will depend on its relations with the Kemalist establishment. Its ability to act independently and to take the initiative is highly restricted due to its quite conscious policy of identifying itself with the state. Since the ultimate aim of the party is to promote state interests – which in most developing countries means something different than society’s interests – they will strive to distance themselves from controversial issues. Even if they attempt to undertake certain new initiatives, due to the narrow space in which they have to manoeuvre with respect to loyalty to official ideology, they will be unable to go any further than reconstructing and reproducing official policies. This policy represents an inherent contradiction, however, between party identity and party options, a contradiction that may well prove to be self-destructive for the party in the future. We may also state another paradox at this point. The isolation of the party helped it to avoid contentious issues and develop its image, while participating in the government has limited its options both because of the secularist demands of the regime and because of the party’s self-imposed silence. It is paradoxical that a party gains strength from being marginal and loses strength from joining the government.

Turkey has recently witnessed two simultaneous developments of special importance. These are, on the one hand, the Islamization of Turkish nationalism, and, on the other hand, an increasing level of glorification of the Ottoman past. These developments, which have led to the emergence of new fault lines between state and society, are especially prevalent among the followers of the NAP. At the same time that the party leaders are witnessing this development in their political base, they continue to seek greater legitimacy in the eyes of the Turkish establishment. This leaves the party in a most uneasy position, one which will soon lead to a widening gap between followers and leadership if the latter chooses to continue to play a highly subordinate role in the Turkish political system. The only strategic tool available to the party to continue to command the loyalty of their power
base is through patronage relations and the use of state resources under their control to keep followers in line. By contrast, if they were to choose to follow a policy-line in conformity with the world-view of their followers, their fate would probably be very much like the fate of the Welfare Party.

Any party that wants to share a position of power in the Turkish bureaucracy must, in the long run, pay most serious attention to two critical problems confronting Turkey: the rise of political Islam and the Kurdish question. It seems clear to these observers that the modus vivendi between religion and politics should be reshaped in Turkey, since stifling the political voice of believers merely serves to sow the seeds of greater radicalism. On the Kurdish question, the focus of attention should be shifted to proposals that focus on common elements rather than on differences with respect to questions of citizenship and nationality. Such a new orientation would most certainly bring to the forefront discussions on possibilities of cultural pluralism based on the Ottoman–Islamic legacy shared for a long time by Turks and Kurds.

The NAP’s vision for the solution of the Kurdish problem is restricted to two problematic stances. Nationalist elites tend to argue that regional economic differences and the legacy of feudal power-relations are internal dimensions of the same problem, while they tend to blame Turkey’s problems on an international web of conspiracy that uses the PKK as its agent to weaken and divide Turkey. These arguments are logical, to some extent, but it is important not to ignore the seriousness of the emerging identity-crisis in eastern Turkey. The unwillingness of political elites to acknowledge the real nature of the situation – that Islamic and Kurdish demands must be addressed in a constructive and progressive fashion – will not change the nature of the problem or make it go away. This discussion makes it clear that the NAP’s synthesis would not offer an alternative political project to open new horizons in Turkish politics, since it does not recognize the need for a certain level of progressive political development. Specifically, in the coming decade, Turkey’s politico-economic potential will continue to be held hostage to the domestic political concerns of the elite classes, and the role that Turkey will be able to play in the future of regional or international politics will be highly limited.
NOTES

2. Türkçe was an active member of the junta of the 1960 military coup. He was known as the powerful colonel of 27 May 1960.
3. The other members, because of the intra-group conflicts among them, expelled 14 members of the 1960 Military Coup Junta.
5. Ibid., p.141.
9. Mesut Yılmaz, then Prime Minister of Turkey, declared that any foreign agreement which was contradictory to this document would be removed. Milliyet (3 November 1997).
10. Many of the resigned and transferred deputies would be purged in the April 1999 elections.
11. The scope of repression can be seen in the editorial of the Turkish Daily News (11 November 1998): ‘The Higher Education Board (YOK) has issued new regulations that allegedly aim at ‘fundamentalist’ academics. The new measures add to the already repressive regulations of YOK by saying that those academics who act against the Republic and its values will be fired from schools, will lose their titles as professor or PhD, will lose all their social security rights and will face a life ban in state service ... We have never experienced such repressive and dangerous regulations even under the most authoritarian military regimes in Turkey which are divisive and will further endanger our national unity and solidarity’.
12. The Virtue Party was set up after the Turkish Supreme Court banned the Welfare Party in January 1998.
19. Interview with a group of journalists working for the nationalist newspaper, Kurultay, which is known as voice of the Nationalist Action Party.
20. In a confidential interview, a former leader of Turkey’s other leftist party, the Republican People’s Party, which was founded by Atatürk and failed to exceed the national threshold in April 1999 elections, endorsed the manner and arguments of Raşan Ecevit. This endorsement shows popular perception of the NAP in the leftist camp.
