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Islamic Associations in the Politics of the Turkish Earthquakes

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Turkey
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The two devastating earthquakes that hit Turkey last year, resulting in more than 17,000 deaths and causing extensive material damage to the country's industrial heartland, triggered continuing debates in which the state, state-society relations, and civil society are all being questioned. Particularly in the western press, popular anger with the state's slow and inefficient response to the disaster was portrayed as having reached an unprecedented level, de-deifying the Turkish state which had historically commanded unquestioned trust and fear. In contrast to a state depicted as heavy, shackled and corruption-riddled, the western media and parts of the Turkish press celebrated the birth of a new and vibrant civil society in Turkey. Responding much faster than the state to relief needs, Turkish associations and foundations were hailed as the expression of a new civic consciousness and as an emergent social force driving for democratization.



PHOTO: EPA, 13 NOVEMBER 1999

Rescue workers recover a man from the earthquake debris in Duzce, Turkey.

Disasters are complex and dialectical social phenomena. They are also political events and need to be recognized as such. Post-disaster situations are usually marked by political manipulation of the disaster for short-term gains (either by the state, political parties, or both), by struggles over the distribution of aid and the benefits of reconstruction plans, and by local power contestations. Inasmuch as a disaster uncovers pre-existing economic, social and political structural malaises, it creates an arena for political struggle in which multiple actors are involved (e.g. Guatemala 1976, Mexico City 1985, and Cairo 1992).

Another aspect of disasters that is politicized in certain contexts is how they are explained. Divine wrath is often invoked as the cause of an earthquake, flood, or hurricane. Voltaire's famous poem in response to the 1755 Lisbon earthquake is part of a centuries-old polemic between religious and non-religious explanations of causality. The rise of political Islam renders these polemics deeply political as the post-earthquake situation in Turkey (and before it the Cairo earthquake of 1992) clearly show.

How to explain the earthquake?

The earthquake as a manifestation of divine wrath was a frequent depiction by the Islamic media and Islamic figures. Necmettin Erbakan, the historic leader of the Turkish Islamic movement, described it as 'a warning signal'. In a clear reference to the meeting held at the Gölcük naval base on 28 February 1997, when the army issued an ultimatum for the immediate curtailing of Islamic activism, the thesis that Gölcük (rather than İzmit) was the epicentre of the earthquake was advanced. This had the clear political meaning that the quake was divine retribution against anti-Islamic measures decided in that location. In that meeting, which ultimately led to the downfall of the Welfare Party-led government, a list of measures against Islamists was drawn up to be presented to the National Security Council

(MGK). The measures included a stricter implementation of the Kemalist dress code, especially for women students in institutions of higher education.

Particularly controversial were the statements of Mehmet Kutlular (leader of the Nur Cemaati and owner of the *Yeni Asya* newspaper) directly connecting the earthquake to the February 28 meeting. According to newspapers, Kutlular said: 'When Allah is denied, the prophet questioned, and believers persecuted, the Quran says that such disasters will follow. Quite naturally, Allah will send disasters to those who do not believe in Him and are disrespectful of His laws.'¹ Immediately, three separate state bodies launched investigations. Bülent Ecevit, the Prime Minister, described the statements as 'primitive thinking' and 'an ugly exploitation of religion'.²

Distancing itself from the controversy, the Virtue Party (in the person of Deputy leader Veysel Candan) stressed that the recovery process should be the focus of discussion: 'Is [the earthquake] a divine warning or not? I do not approach the issue from this angle. If you do not put the required amounts of cement and reinforced concrete in buildings, some disaster will inevitably follow. We need to comprehensively assess where we erred and what mistakes were made in the construction and building-technology sectors'.³

The army saw in statements, such as those made by Kutlular, a direct attack on it and a smearing of its name. In September 1999, the MGK reacted against what it termed 'reactionary forces' seeking to exploit the earthquake and warned them of immanent constitutional and administrative measures.⁴ Support for the army was supplied by Kemalist NGOs, led by the Association in Support of Contemporary Living (ÇYDD). Pointing out that Islamists blame Turkey's secularism for the earthquake, ÇYDD's director spoke of the imperative to 'prevent Islamic sects and radical groups that disguise themselves as civil society organizations from hunting down our children in the reigning chaotic situation'.⁵

Islamic associations in the earthquake

The past decade witnessed a significant increase in the number of registered Islamic associations and foundations in Turkey. By 1995, they accounted for 10.4% of the Istanbul associations. In addition to the traditional associations engaged in building mosques and teaching the Quran, a new breed of Islamic associations providing diverse social services spread, targeting poor urban neighbourhoods in particular. The body of Islamic associations is large and diverse in its composition. It includes women's and human rights organizations, foundations that engage in research on Islamic and Ottoman themes, and two prominent associations of industrialists and businessmen (MÜSİAD and İŞHAD).⁶ MÜSİAD in particular is significant as the organizational expression of the Islamic business sector that boomed in the aftermath of post-1980 economic liberalization. It is now one of the more important 'new alternative spaces' to the hegemonic Kemalist state ideology and

institutions,⁷ and is a major financial contributor to Islamic associations, mirroring and guiding their focus on social justice-oriented grassroots work.

In general, the diversity and sophistication of the Islamic associations parallels the rise of both Islamic business activity and the electoral successes of political Islam at the national and local levels. They also benefit from the proliferation of Islamic media. The richness of this new Islamic associational activity is also a manifestation of the weight accorded to the issue of 'civil society' by Islamic groups. The Welfare Party had first introduced the theme of a system of 'multiple legal orders' as a promotion of an Islamic understanding of civil society against the modern, totalitarian Turkish nation-state.⁸ The theme was subsequently taken up by the Virtue Party, which formulated an agenda for Quality Management in Politics.⁹ An important component of the agenda is strengthening Turkish civil society and establishing links between the party and CSOs.¹⁰ Recognizing the significance of a broad human rights and legal reform agenda for the party's own survival and uninterrupted activity, the Virtue Party – even if out of self-interest – has taken the issue of 'civil society' to heart.

Following the earthquake, Islamic associations formed special task forces and dispatched volunteers to the disaster area. Co-ordination centres were established to channel information about needs and distribute assistance to victims. In addition to handing out relief assistance, Islamic NGOs set up communal kitchens and childcare centres, established fixed and mobile medical units, and provided tents – some of which had originally been bought for the Kosovo Albanians. A number of these NGOs had plans to erect new tent-camps or prefabricated housing sites.

The contribution of Islamic associations can be summed up as follows: focused on relief and visible, but not dominating the post-quake non-governmental scene. Islamic associations were one of an array of Turkish NGOs active in the disaster area. The earthquake's proximity to Istanbul, the magnitude of the disaster, and extensive media coverage, had all brought forth unprecedented civic activism and volunteerism. The rush of NGOs to the scene, together with hundreds of individual volunteers, was nevertheless accompanied by factional competition, most notably between the antithetical Islamic and Kemalist associations. Islamic relief was also criticized by a number of Turkish NGOs for being partisan and discriminatory, and deliberately oppositional to the state.

MÜSİAD complained of 'bureaucratic hurdles' in the face of assistance delivery. In this it was reiterating what other Turkish NGOs and international aid agencies were experiencing. The state's unease with criticisms of its inefficiency and its discomfort with the portrayal of civil society as a better alternative, led it to centralize all aid and relief operations in state organizations (measures that were later eased). Restrictions – which were uneven and discriminatory – were placed on the collection and distribution of aid by independent and voluntary organizations. Is-

lamic associations in particular were targeted. The bank funds of İHH and Mazlum-Der were confiscated, and those of HakYol Vakfı blocked and minutely scrutinized. In Gölcük, Islamic NGOs were asked to cease their activities and to physically leave the area. Islamic associations, however, show sophistication and tenacity in dealing with state restrictions. Many employ a legal expert who 'clears' their documents of any problematic terms. They are also experienced in re-forming themselves and camouflaging their activities. Activists in the disaster area said that this is what they will continue to do and that they will stay as long as the humanitarian emergency situation deems.

Concluding words

The two earthquakes in Turkey generated a significant collective questioning of the state establishment and institutions. It also increased the visibility of a 'civil society' that has resources and potential, but is fragmented, conflictual and often elitist. As civil society activism came into public and state attention, the strength and sophistication of Islamic voluntary associations also became evident. The 'cat and mouse' game between the Turkish state (led by the army) and various Islamic groups will no doubt continue, but the proliferation of diverse Islamic associations with strong grassroots linkages is a testimony to the embeddedness of political Islam and its multiple sources of power. It is also one expression of broader processes within Turkey pressurizing the state to become responsive, accountable, and to open up democratic spaces. ♦

Notes

1. *Star*, 11-10-1999.
2. *Zaman*, 12-10-1999.
3. *Cumhuriyet*, 12-10-1999.
4. *Ibid.* 1-10-1999.
5. *Ibid.* 21-9-1999.
6. MÜSİAD is the Independent Association of Industrialists and Businessmen, with a membership of more than 3,000 individual companies. İŞHAD is the Solidarity Association for Business Life (İş Hayatı Dayanışma Derneği), associated with Fethullah Gülen's Nurcu movement, includes over 2000 businessmen and merchants.
7. Yavuz, Hakan (1999). 'Towards an Islamic Liberalism? The Nurcu Movement and Fethullah Gülen'. *Middle East Journal* 53 (4) pp. 584-605, at 585.
8. See Güllalp, Haldun (1999). 'Political Islam in Turkey: The Rise and Fall of the Refah Party'. *The Muslim World* 89 (1), pp. 22-41.
9. Siyasette Toplam Kalite Yöntemi.
10. See Recai Kutan's speech to the Virtue Party's Consultative Council, 5 September 1998 (full text on: <http://www.fp.org.tr/khamam-dm-acl.htm>).

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