

## **The Politics of Turkish Democracy: İsmet İnönü and the Formation of the Multi-Party System, 1938-1950**

John M. VanderLippe

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The transformation of the Turkish political system from one-party authoritarian rule to multi-party democracy in the aftermath of the Second World War represents a major landmark in Turkey's modern political history. The opening up of the political system, accompanied by the emergence of opposition parties and rapid spread of electoral mobilization, culminated in the peaceful transfer of power from ruling Republican People's Party to the main political opposition, the Democratic Party, in the Republic's first free and honest elections in 1950. The transition to democracy in Turkey was by fiat and from above: unlike the earlier Western European experience, it was not preceded by organized movements demanding political citizenship rights through peaceful or violent tactics. The Turkish case also differed from some of the more recent democratic transitions in Eastern Europe where the collapse of the Communist regimes paved the way for freely elected governments. Turkey embarked on the path toward democracy as a result of President İsmet İnönü's critical decision at the end of 1945 to liberalize the country's political system by permitting the formation of opposition parties. As he was wont to remind his audiences in later years, İnönü might well have remained as the undisputed leader of an authoritarian regime until the end of his life if he wanted to. However, unlike two of his contemporaries, Spain's Generalissimo Franco and Portugal's Salazar, who preserved their authoritarian regimes well into the 1970s until their death, İnönü chose to dismantle a system which had provided himself and his predecessor, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, with absolute political power.

The process of political liberalization in Turkey from 1946 to 1950, which had far reaching consequences for Turkish politics and society in the years to come, has been the subject of extensive scholarly discussion and debate. The arguments offered in books and

articles published on the subject basically fall into three groups. The first, and by far the most popular, view explains the transition to democracy largely as the outcome of international pressures exerted on Turkey by Western powers for a regime change and Turkey's efforts to join the ranks of the democratic countries in the newly-emerging bipolar international system. The second view emphasizes the role of social structural changes, particularly the growing influence of the economic and business elites who became increasingly critical of the prevailing etatist economic policies and pushed for political liberalization as a means to strengthen the private sector through more liberal economic policies. Thirdly, there are those who explain the transformation of the political system with reference to such factors as İnönü's personal belief system and leadership, the long historical trajectory of party and electoral politics in Turkey, or the fact that the authoritarian regime in Turkey was never construed to be a permanent project in the first place and that its evolution into a democracy was the intended outcome of its founders.

In *The Politics of Turkish Democracy: İsmet İnönü and the formation of the Multi-Party System in Turkey* John VanderLippe does not set out to prove or disprove any one of these competing perspectives. Instead, through a careful reading and analysis of the available sources, he provides a useful history of domestic and international developments from 1938 to 1950 which led to the end of authoritarian rule and the beginning of democratic politics. Much of these developments has been chronicled in earlier studies, most notably in Kemal Karpat's seminal *Turkey's Politics: The Transition to a Multi-Party System* (Princeton University Press, 1959) and in George S. Harris's unpublished 1956 Harvard doctoral dissertation "A Political History of Turkey, 1945-1950." The main lines of VanderLippe's narrative on the events of the 1946-50 period do not deviate significantly from these earlier works. However, *The Politics of Turkish Democracy* differs from them by examining the early years of İnönü's presidency beginning in 1938 as well as its final phase in the late

1940s. Moreover, VanderLippe's study incorporates a wealth of new sources (books, articles, documents) which have been published on the subject in more recent years. As a result, it offers a fresh look at the interplay between the tightrope act which Turkey played to maintain its 'uneasy neutrality' during the war and the emergence of organized political opposition at home following President İnönü's historic decision regarding the beginning of multi-party politics.

VanderLippe suggests that İsmet İnönü's presidency could be "seen as an intersection in modern Turkish history from which two roads could have followed." (p. 5). One of these would have led to the maintenance of the authoritarian system through increased repression and control. The other would mean opening up the system to dissent through the liberalization of the political institutions and processes. According to the author, "the road chosen was neither the route to complete suppression of dissent nor truly open, representative democracy." (p.5) Rather, the opening up of the political space after 1945 paved the way for the establishment of multi-party politics but it did not lead to the emergence of a stable democracy. Although VanderLippe's point is well-taken, he does not probe deeper into the possible causes of this problem with the aid of the rich theoretical and country-specific political science literature on regime changes and democratic transitions. In fact, *The Politics of Turkish Democracy* is a straightforward historical analysis of the politics of the 1938-1950 period which led to the emergence of a multi-party system.

The book has its proper share of minor problems. For example, Recep Peker is identified as "a known admirer of Italian fascism." (p.82). This may well have been the case but the author does not cite any references which would support his assertion. Similarly, statistical tables, such as those on "Turkey's Major Trading Partners, 1938-1945" (p.41) or "Military Expenditures, 1938-1945" (p. 69) do not list any sources. Kazim Karabekir became the Speaker of the Assembly in 1946 although the description of this event (p. 35) reads as if

it took place immediately after İnonü became president in 1938. More importantly, the absence of a concluding chapter which could have summarized some of the main findings of the study is lamentable.

Despite these minor shortcomings VanderLippe's well-written book represents a welcome addition to studies on recent Turkish politics. It merits the attention of all those interested in learning more about one of the most critical and fascinating periods in modern Turkish political history.

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