ISLAMIST MOBILIZATION IN TURKEY

A Study in Vernacular Politics
In November 1997, people in living rooms and offices all over Turkey were hotly debating the seemingly inexorable progress of the Constitutional Court toward a decision to shut down Turkey’s most prominent and successful Islam-based political party, the Welfare Party. This party had attracted a much greater variety of supporters than any previous Islam-inspired party: conservative townspeople and poor urban migrants, but also up-and-coming professionals, intellectuals, and wealthy industrialists. Many working-class and conservative women became political activists for the first time, going door to door to get out the vote for Welfare. Even people who were against the party, or any Islamic party, having a place in national politics spoke with awe of the extent to which the party had organized its followers, street by street.

Whatever the party was doing, it was working. In the local elections of 1994, the Welfare Party doubled its votes nationally and captured almost half the mayoral seats in provincial capitals, including six of Turkey’s fifteen largest cities. To the great consternation of the country’s secular elites, Istanbul, Turkey’s most cosmopolitan city, elected a Welfare Party mayor, as did the capital, Ankara. In the 1995 general elections, Welfare won the largest number of seats in parliament. The political interests of its constituents ranged widely, from social and economic reform to replacing the secular state system with one founded on Islamic law.
The Constitutional Court, arguing that the party posed a threat to the laic foundations of the state, opened a case against it. Laicism, one of the founding principles of the secular Turkish state, refers to the subordination of religion to the state. The laicist state aims to control all public expressions of Islamic practice, down to training the prayer leaders of mosques and vetting their sermons. Public debate revolved around whether or not an openly Islamic party should be allowed to participate in the political system. People against the party speculated darkly about what would happen if it came to power. Others were conflicted and mused that closing a legitimately elected party of any kind was undemocratic, although perhaps that was the price that had to be paid to keep the country secular. Given the political elite’s hostility to the party and anxiety about the party’s ultimate intentions, it seemed a foregone conclusion that the party would be closed down.

To my great surprise, Welfare Party activists seemed unconcerned. When I asked what they would do if the party was closed, they invariably answered that nothing would change. Some scoffed that closing the party was meaningless. One bearded businessman, a Welfare Party member who volunteered with an Islamic charity foun-
dation, looked bemused at my question. “If they close the party, then a few politicians lose their jobs; that’s all. It has no effect on us. We’re a social movement, not a party.” Others gave similar explanations. They shrugged and said that their social and political networks would not be affected by closing the party.

I found this calm unconcern striking, given the decibel level of national debate and the assumption behind the court action—that closing the Welfare Party would eliminate the threat of Islam in politics. It gave me to wonder, if not party politics, then what kind of politics was I witnessing? If the party was dispensable, how then were people organizing themselves politically? In such a tightly run party, how did activists remain independent? Perhaps, I speculated, they formed civic organizations that worked together with the party while remaining autonomous. But the number of civic organizations involved with Welfare, and their range of activities and membership, did not account for anywhere near the level of organized activism mobilizing behind the party. And what was mobilizing them? How important was Islam in all this, given the wide variety of supporters?

The global spread of Islam-based politics gave these questions broader importance. They concerned the nature of political processes that were developing in major urban centers worldwide, attracting hybrid populations and frequently taking inspiration from Islam. The questions also seemed applicable to political mobilization that did not revolve around an Islamic interpretation.

In February 1998, the Welfare Party was closed and its leader temporarily exiled from politics. Another Islam-inspired party, the Virtue Party, was formed within days and continued to attract a strong and equally diverse following. Before long, a case was opened against Virtue, but its activists remained, as always, confident, committed to a movement that Virtue shared but clearly did not control.

This is a book about that political process. It challenges the premise that political Islam and Islamist political ideology can fully be understood as national political phenomena apart from the cultural beliefs, local practices, and often contradictory motivations of their adherents. Likewise, the book questions the usefulness of analytically separating “modern” civil society and party politics from “traditional” communalistic practices, institutional from individual relations, or political ideology from cultural beliefs. A fresh look at political process is suggested with the introduction of vernacular pol-
itics, a concept that reconnects political ideology and culture, organization and process.

This requires us to think outside the categories we have inherited for understanding political life. We tend to conceive of society and politics in terms of familiar solidarities, based on the communion of family, clan, tribe, religion, and ethnicity, or on the liberated individualism of modern urbanism, civil society, bureaucracy, liberal, secular democracy, and the market. In studying political movements, analysts look for shared motivations, whether these be ethnic affiliation, religious ideology, class interests, or national identity. The logistics of solidarity also come under scrutiny, acted out in local networks or as civil society, interest groups, political parties, and ethnic and religious organizations.

“Vernacular politics”1 helps us refocus on the political process in a new way that makes no assumptions about motivation or form, allowing us to grasp the hybrid nature of modern urban-based political processes. The Islamist movement in Turkey in the 1990s and at the beginning of the twenty-first century is a community- and value-centered political process that, despite its local roots, is able to draw large numbers of people of diverse backgrounds into national politics. I use the term Islamist movement to mean a general mobilization of people around cultural, political, and social issues that are presented and interpreted through an Islamic idiom. What I will refer to as an Islamist movement is by no means coherent in organization, ideological interpretation, goal, or method. Like any loosely drawn movement, it aims to unify people around a shared ideology and social and political goals. Islam is the central idiom to which all participants appeal.

However, from a different angle, the Islamist movement in Turkey encompasses a variety of people with contradictory motivations and goals and sometimes radically differing interpretations of fundamental religious principles and political platforms. “Islam” itself takes a variety of forms. What binds people together in the Islamist movement is neither ideology (be it political or religious) nor any particular type of organization (whether civil society or “tribe”). Rather, the movement is rooted in local culture and interpersonal relations, while also drawing on a variety of civic and political organizations and ideologies.

While the cultural values underlying this political process are not new, their power to mobilize large numbers of diverse people is new.
This can be directly linked to conditions of urban life as new populations have entered the cities and over the span of two generations developed communities made up of people from a variety of backgrounds and facing distinctly urban problems. New types of solidarity, resting on familiar cultural values, recreated a sense of community and simultaneously allowed the community to become a political force.

In Turkey, the Islam-inspired Welfare Party found in this participatory local politics a powerful tool for mobilizing the population. Welfare and its successor, the Virtue Party, owed much of their success to their ability to incorporate hybrid populations and to build on local community networks. To gain access to these community networks, the party itself had to become “intimate.” It did so by interacting with constituents on an individual level through known, trusted neighbors, building on sustained, face-to-face relationships, and by situating its political message within the community’s cultural codes and norms. The Islamist activists also worked through a variety of institutions, from the political party and its municipal institutions to civic groups. Seemingly unrelated types of acts, from neighborly visits and marriage counseling to volunteering for a charity foundation or demonstrating in front of a mosque for religious freedom, were braided together and brought up to the national level within the political and ideological frame of party politics.

In other words, to comprehend the nature of Islamism in Turkey and its place in a political democracy, it is necessary to take a closer look at how Islam and politics are lived, not only at how they are theorized and proselytized. Gudrun Kramer has warned that “it is not possible to talk about Islam and democracy in general, but only about Muslims living and theorizing under specific historical circumstances” (Kramer, 1993, 4). It is only by looking at how people (local activists, supporters, and dissenters, as well as intellectuals and politicians) think and act politically that we can hope to understand the interconnection of religion and politics, politics and culture, and civil society and democracy. It also behooves us to remember, as Robert Darnton (1984, 4) famously put it, that ordinary people think with things. This entails, for us, investigating practices that have been labeled “Islam,” “politics,” and “civil society” as they are interwoven with the material conditions governing the lives of ordinary people under very concrete circumstances in Istanbul, Turkey. In order to do so, we must look at process, not static institutional models, at organizing, not organizations.
Islamist practice does not take place in isolation, but is set off against Kemalist secularist activism. Kemalism, the term used by secularist supporters of the status quo, is a highly charged worldview. It derives from the governing principles set in place early in the twentieth century by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, who initiated a great social and political experiment designed to modernize and Westernize Turkey. Like Islamism, the term Kemalism cannot be taken at face value as an analytical category. In practice, it refers to a varied and changing complex of behaviors and beliefs. However, Islamist and Kemalist are widely used as self-referential categories and it is in this spirit that I use the terms here.

While these appear as competing dyads in Turkish public life, in the factualness of everyday life they form a continuum. The meanings and parameters of Islamism and Kemalism overlap; they rely on similar institutions and share constituencies. What, then, gave Islamist political practice its edge? To answer this question, this book follows the activities of two sets of local activists, one Islamist, the other secularist, in the working-class Istanbul neighborhood of Ümraniye.

The analysis will work outward from the manner in which religion, politics, and economic status are embedded in daily practice, to the manner in which these are expressed institutionally at the national level and in party politics. The premise for this onion-like exfoliation is that the latter cannot be understood without the former. A focus on institutions, ideology, and the utterances of elites inevitably suggests certain conventional interpretations; a focus on the local or cultural suggests other interpretations that have been discussed above. The interplay of both, it is hoped, will suggest a new formula for interrelating elements that generally have been considered discretely.

**An Initial Conversation**

When embarking on this project, I explained to my acquaintances and friends in the working-class Istanbul neighborhood of Ümraniye, where I had done research a decade before, that I was interested in how local people participated in political and civic life. This led to discussions of demonstrations and community involvement. When, during my stay in 1995, I expressed an interest in the inner workings of the Islam-inspired Welfare Party that had recently
won the municipal elections away from the secularist Republican People’s Party, my friend Sevgi confided that her new husband’s younger brother, Halil, worked for the Welfare Party municipality. I visited Sevgi and her husband Hasan in their rented apartment in an outlying district of Ümraniye.

Ümraniye is a large, bustling neighborhood on the Asian side of Istanbul, with a population of over two hundred thousand. It is primarily working-class, with some quite poor areas. It began, as did many Istanbul neighborhoods, as a squatter area that over the years was gradually absorbed into the city proper. Despite this bureaucratic and infrastructural incorporation, Ümraniye’s residents hold a tentative position as urbanites that must be continually negotiated. This insecurity extends from the precariousness of their livelihoods to their unacceptability as “urban types” to other city dwellers who see themselves as being more modern and Westernized.

Sevgi and Hasan lived in a newly developed area with broad, multi-story apartment buildings set along wide, chalky streets, still barren of gardens or trees. There were a few small shops (mostly groceries) on the ground floor of some of the buildings, but none of the hustle and bustle of life in downtown Ümraniye. In fact, Sevgi complained, there was nothing to do—no place even to stroll and look in the shop windows. She spent most of her days at home.

Their apartment was a third-floor walk-up, with two other apartments on the same floor. It was a new building, with a wide staircase, but the apartments were small. To the left of the entryway, where we traded our shoes for slippers, was a long kitchen leading onto a narrow balcony that ran the entire side of the apartment. There were cabinets in the kitchen, and on that day a large flowered cloth lay on the floor, piled high with hazelnuts drying in their green husks. Her sister-in-law, Nefise, perched on the bed-couch in the small, unadorned sitting room. Nefise’s face was framed by a light, cotton, indoor head scarf, fringed with complex crochet-work that matched the color of her clothing. Nefise was slim, with a delicate, intelligent face and a sweet smile. While she spoke, her hands were busy crocheting.

I shed my coat and took a seat on a chair. I had just returned from a pre-wedding, all-women henna party with Sevgi and thus wore a long, narrow, linen skirt and a loose but short-sleeved, festive gold silk blouse. My hair, as usual, was uncovered. Sevgi settled down in the armchair beside me. She had removed her coat and silk out-
door over-scarf, but retained her cotton indoor scarf, now loosened. Sevgi introduced me to Nefise and we chatted aimlessly about the events of the day. We were joined by Sevgi’s unmarried younger sister, Bahire, who was visiting from her village. They asked me about my project and I explained that I was interested in understanding whether or not people in Ümraniye joined civic organizations, and, if not, how they organized themselves to participate in politics and civic activities.

They grasped right away what I wanted to know and began to tell me about their own experiences or things they had heard. Nefise, upon hearing our spirited discussion, soon lost her initial diffidence and warmed to the topic. She told me that she used to work at the Ümraniye municipality. Sevgi noted proudly that her sister-in-law had done all kinds of work there, from typing to organizing and producing reports. Nefise began to tell me about the many things her job had entailed, including advanced computer skills, when Hasan entered the room and summarized, “A secretary, that is.”

Hasan was a handsome, affable man, even-tempered, with an easy smile and a welcoming manner. He was a driver for a private company and, like many men in the neighborhood, also drove a taxi during his off hours. I was pleased for Sevgi that she had married well. I repeated the description of my project and he assured me that his brother Halil would be happy to help me in my research. Then he began to describe the Welfare Party’s activities in Ümraniye, the young women occasionally chiming in enthusiastically.

“The [Ümraniye] Welfare mayor is around all the time. I never saw the Republican People’s Party mayor. But as soon as the Welfare mayor was elected, I saw him down the block getting a haircut. Then I saw him a few blocks away eating in a restaurant. Then a few months later I met a friend of mine in the street and he said he was going to meet the mayor at a local community place where he was holding a meeting. The Welfare folks really care about people. They go door to door and see if anyone needs anything. They eat in people’s homes and, if they see that there is very little food, only a few olives and bread, they help them.”

I asked, with some surprise, “They eat the poor people’s food?”

“Yes, but they also bring a big basket of supplies with them. Neighbors tell them if they think a family needs help and then they go there.”

“Do they know the people they go to?”
“They may not know them but they GET to know them,” Nefise answered.

Hasan continued, “The [Welfare Party] mayor of Istanbul, Tayyip Erdoğan, lives in a rental apartment in Üsküdar. They offered him the official residence but he refused. He lives just like us…. During Ramazan [the month of fasting] they set up tents with donat-ed food, rice, meatballs, so that people can eat if they can’t get home right away [when the day’s fasting ends at sunset] or if people are poor. They can eat for free. There are also tents for cheap school materials when school opens in the fall. And tents with inexpensive used and donated clothing. They started it; it was their idea, although the other parties do it now too.”

Bahire asked, “What did the Republican People’s Party ever do for us?”

“A course in sewing,” Nefise offered, disparagingly.

“Yes, at the municipality,” Sevgi replied. “I went to that. And they had one in cloth painting”—turning to me—“and things like that.”

Halil came into the room, looked startled (perhaps at my attire), and sat down on the couch next to Nefise, his wife, who said not a word after this. He was a slim, lean man with a sharp face and a thin moustache. He wore black slacks and a white shirt, adding to his austere appearance. He listened to our discussion and reiterated the story about the tents, adding emphatically that, while Turkey was not a democracy, the Welfare Party did act democratically. He cited as an example of this the fact that, every Wednesday, Welfare held an open meeting (Açık Oturum) where the mayor sat in his office and anyone could come and make requests of or complain to him. The mayor then dealt with each concern. Halil’s voice was quarrelsome and strident. The theme of Turkey not being a democracy came up again and again. I tried not to argue, but found myself defending Turkey.

“But Turkey is a democracy,” I suggested mildly.

“Being a democracy means the army is under civilian rule,” he pointed out. Halil was referring to the military’s dominant presence on the National Security Council, which advises the government. Many of the government’s anti-Islamist policies originate in the National Security Council and the military is outspoken about its opposition to any ideology that it suspects endangers the laic basis of the state.

“That isn’t the only criterion,” I replied. “There are elections here, unlike many other places in the Middle East.”
He elaborated on the unfairness and undemocratic nature of not being able to dress as one wished. He gave the example of a friend’s daughter who was unable to continue her medical studies because she wouldn’t be allowed to wear her head scarf in school. Some teachers at universities, he insisted, discriminate against students with head scarves. I agreed that people should be able to wear whatever clothing they wish.

“There are no laws against this in your country,” he insisted heatedly.

“True, but there are informal dress codes and infractions are punished by loss of one’s job or public ridicule. And private businesses are allowed to make whatever rules they want about dress.”

This was not exactly correct, I realized. There are always cases where people feel their religious rights are infringed upon, but these are solved in court, according to principles that respect religious rights. I emphasized that in the United States great attention is paid to the separation of church and state, so, for instance, there is no prayer in schools.

He brought up the Turkish government’s recent moves to rein in Islamist influence by cracking down on Islamist schools.

“Don’t you have schools of nuns?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “I went to one, but it has a similar curriculum to that of public schools.”

“So do the imam-hatip [Islamic] schools. The only difference is a couple of additional courses in Arabic and on the Quran.”

Somehow the discussion of democracy segued into a discussion of Islamic (sharia) law. Perhaps I was the first to bring it up, when I tried to explain why Welfare scared many secularist Turks, that people thought that Welfare wanted sharia law, not democracy. Much to my surprise, instead of taking the opportunity to demur, Halil fired into a heated defense of sharia.

“We have to follow Allah’s design.”

Referring to our previous conversation, I asked him whether Allah’s design was democracy.

He was momentarily flustered but soon caught up again in sloganlike exclamations about the requirement to follow Allah’s will. His voice was hard and almost spitting, his eyes steely, his back arched as if daring me to disagree. Beside him, Nefise squirmed, looking pained and uncomfortable. Hasan broke in occasionally to restate what Halil was saying in less radical and clearer terms, fishing out of his flood of rhetoric points of actual fact or contention (the tents,
the imam-hatip schools, head scarves, the fact that Turkey does have some democracy). Hasan also seemed embarrassed by his brother’s outbreak and sloganizing fervor. I attempted not to argue or disagree, merely to mark his points and make relevant comments, but my simple presence seemed to inflame him.

Halil’s arguments matched almost word for word those of Mehmet Metiner, an advisor to Mayor Erdoğan, with whom I had had a conversation two years earlier. When I asked him what would happen to secular Muslims who did not wish to live under sharia law, Halil answered, as Metiner had, that Christians and Jews could live [in a kind of confessional federalism] under whatever system they wanted. When I pointed out that I was not talking about non-Muslims, but about Muslims, Halil repeated his explanation about Christians and Jews (as had Metiner). Finally, after my third reiteration of the same question, Halil muttered something about Muslims having to follow holy law, but that there was no compulsion in religion—that is, no one could be forced into doing anything against their will. Then he fell uncomfortably silent. Metiner, in exasperation, had spit out that secularist Muslims “aren’t Muslims!”

I pressed the advantage of my relationship to Halil’s sister-in-law, married to his elder brother, who, in this age-hierarchical society, he was expected to respect (and obey). Supported by Hasan, I told Halil that I would like to observe Welfare’s activities myself and document them. Grudgingly, he invited me to come to the Açık Oturum and other Welfare events. I thanked him and said I would call to arrange it. He and Nefise got up to take their leave. I reached out my hand and registered a moment’s hesitation before he took it to shake, fleetingly. Nefise trailed out after him. I felt very sorry for her and couldn’t help but imagine that he treated her with the same unbending will that he had demonstrated here, and submitted her to merciless ideological scrutiny.

After they left, the four of us sat contemplatively for a moment, the room seeming to silently vibrate in the wake of Halil’s verbal violence. Bahire broke the silence, uttering quietly and simply, “He speaks so harshly.”

Another silence followed. Hasan agreed, but added that he had become like this since joining the Welfare Party. “I don’t understand it.”

This is the story of a journey that began here—with a large, close-knit family, a discussion of issues, and a demonstration of ideological force, framed as an appeal to both democracy and religious
law. The conversation revealed generational and gender contradictions, although these were acknowledged only as personal characteristics. Not unfittingly, given my project, the conversation ended with an invitation to participate in civic and political events. My own journey of understanding traversed this ideological terrain again and again in the lives of different families, different people on both sides of the issues. The growth of mutual respect between Halil and me, perhaps even of liking, is one thread of this complex narrative. So is my warm relationship with the secularist activists of the Ümraniye Women’s Center, as intolerant in some respects as Halil and his colleagues in others. It was no easy task to settle myself squarely into such highly charged opposing camps, to winnow out what I could agree with, and to keep myself from rejecting outright what I found objectionable. I took great care never to give either group to believe that I stood with them against the other, but only addressed individual issues, about which, when asked, I gave my honest opinion. Above all, I came to appreciate the sincere desire for a better society that motivated both groups, although each would probably disagree about that with regard to the other.

It feels odd to order my experiences, which are infused with the warmth, generosity, unfailing hospitality, and friendship of the people I knew, into an impersonal narrative with quite a different goal. Yet I feel that the journey down the road of understanding is worthwhile and that the people of Ümraniye would support my attempt to grasp their ordering of the political and social world.

The Negotiated Landscape

The Istanbul cityscape is like a raised Braille script that the traveler can read as a code for the different forces and interests, and the negotiations among them, that characterize the city. The cityscape is dominated by vistas of unimproved cement. It is a modern landscape, but because of the often substandard building materials and frequent disregard for building codes, ultimately insubstantial. Entire swaths of the city were tragically flattened in 1999 by a 7.4 magnitude earthquake that killed 12,000 people. Yet the vigor of the city continues to push its way inexorably out of the earth in the form of high-rise urban architecture. Even the hand-built squatter homes on the outskirts of the city optimistically sprout antennae of steel rods, ready to stabilize the next floor when the resident can afford bricks and
mortar. Squatter neighborhoods I knew in the mid-1980s now are cityscapes themselves, with rows of three- and four-story buildings, the ground floors colorful with shops. With the rapid swelling of the city, its population now estimated at nearly nine million, some of these neighborhoods have been invaded by even taller luxury apartment dwellings and by gated communities, eliding geographic boundaries between migrants from the countryside and middle-class city dwellers, although differences are seemingly maintained (even heightened) by language, dress, and norms of behavior, especially those regarding women.

But even here the operative word is change, as dress and behavioral norms metamorphose in different directions among all sectors of the population. This metamorphosis can lead to (perhaps rather unexpected) convergences, as when a veiled young woman in jeans kisses her boyfriend in the park, or a secularist university student takes on the veil. It leads as well to hardened oppositions, as when a veiled woman is refused a job because of her clothing and what this is believed to imply about her social and political views. The cityscape, in other words, may be ephemeral, but the population’s drive toward an urbaniy of its own making is powerfully pushing up new buildings and generating new styles and relations among residents. This is demonstrated in the political arena as residents of poorer neighborhoods unite with merchants, industrialists, and the intellectual elite in new, hybrid, social movements.

The city is bisected by the Bosphorus strait. One side of the city is in Europe, the other lies on the continent of Asia. The European side of the strait is global Istanbul, teeming with young professionals, internationally connected artists, writers, and musicians, transvestites, a gay community, foreign expatriates and businesspeople, as well as artisans and shopkeepers. In summer, European Istanbul is clotted with tourists. Residents relax in the many restaurants, bars, nightclubs, and cafes, and stroll or shop in world-class shopping malls and well-stocked supermarkets. When residents of the city’s Asian shore are crossing over, they say they are going “to Istanbul,” or simply “to the city.”

To get to Ümraniye, I took a boat to the Asian side. I passed up the ponderous, but charming, wood-paneled municipal ferries that lumber from shore to shore at scheduled intervals, preferring one of the small private taxi boats that leap from the shore as soon as they have taken on a full load of passengers. As the boat bumped along in
the wake of a passing tanker, through the spray I could make out the approaching Asian shoreline. We landed at Üsküdar, site of ancient Chrysopolis and starting point for the great Roman roads that stretched eastward from Byzantium. The central square directly behind the ferry landing is surrounded by stately mosque complexes from Ottoman times, many endowed by women of the royal family. Now a conservative neighborhood of lower-middle-class and working-class people, it is still the portal to Asian Istanbul’s hinterland.

Both sides of the Bosphorus are lined with hills. The highest hill, Çamlıca, is on the Asian side and is crowned by a park from which on a rare clear day one can see the entire confluence of the Bosphorus, from its mouth in the Black Sea to its intersection with the Golden Horn and the Sea of Marmara to the south. If one then turns around toward the Asian continent, there is the sudden, disorienting view of a vast sea of houses as far as the eye can see in all directions. In the center of this, like an enormous mottled and tattered carpet of indefinite colors and perimeter, lies Ümraniye.

The ship’s passengers began to leap ashore across the narrowing stretch of shuddering green water as soon as the rubber tires hanging from the side bumped up against the pier. A line of blue minibus dolmuşlar stretched along the square in front of the mosque. These shared taxis, found all over the city, ply regular routes and charge set fees for each length of the route. The dolmuşlar, now ubiquitous, began service as family businesses, informal means of linking outlying and inaccessible squatter areas with the city. Eventually, dolmuş drivers formed politically powerful, self-organized drivers’ associations that regulated appearance, routes, and fares.

Yet, until the recent government imposition of uniform standards, these vehicles remained wheeled monuments to personal creativity, from jury-rigged motors using handcrafted spare parts to car interiors as canvases for personal expression. Up through the 1980s, dolmuşlar were old United States automobiles, 1950s Fords and Chevrolets that had been stretched in length to add a middle bench. They could seat eight or more slightly hunched passengers. Rounded fenders gleaming, fins rampant, the brightly colored and well-tended cars paraded the streets and avenues along predetermined routes. Ignoring designated stops, they took on anyone waving them down. Standardization made itself felt slowly, first by the disappearance of interior whimsy: glass vases attached to the dashboard by suction cups, carpeted dashboards arrayed with framed
photos, dolls, and soccer paraphernalia, the drivers’ goat shag or colorful woven seat throws. Slowly, the elegant antique cars themselves disappeared from the road, replaced by rumbling, fume-spewing minivans. In the late 1990s, seemingly overnight, all the minivans became either bright canary yellow or a dusty blue, depending on the route. Under the dour and unimaginative bureaucratic eye of government regulation, taxis underwent the same homogenization, with the result that the streets of Istanbul now channel rivers of jockeying yellow vehicles.

Even though it is now part of the city’s official transportation system, the dolmuş remains a hybrid creature, deeply embedded in local culture. The negotiated quality of local life, the imperative of norms and personal relationships, the triumph of ingenuity stamp the dolmuş system as quintessentially local. On the Ümraniye dolmuş, unrelated men and women tried to avoid sitting next to one another; if they had to, their body language demonstrated overt constraint. The driver made a detour to take a friend or relative closer to home. He circumvented traffic by driving over the sidewalk and through a small wooded area to emerge on the street farther along, or simply steered the minibus the wrong way down a one-way street, gingerly swerving through oncoming traffic.

The packed dolmuş veered along the built-up boulevards, twisting down ever smaller, dustier streets to emerge on Ümraniye’s main road, which bisected the bustle of shops spilling from the bases of three- and four-story brown cement houses. The streets teemed with people, the men in dark, ill-fitting suits or patterned knit sweaters and slacks, most women in colorful head scarves and loose, enveloping clothing: skirts and sweaters or the fashionable tailored, loose coat that was part of the new Islamic tesettür style. In seeming contradiction, some unmarried young women wore tight jeans and form-fitting T-shirts. As modest married women, however, they would often “close” (kapat) themselves, that is, cover their heads and bodily curves in public. Not all women wore head scarves. There was a broad continuum of degree and style of covering, from the formless black body veil, çarşaf, to the colorful pastel stylishness of tesettür, to simple slacks and sweater, uncovered hair dyed or streaked blond.

The overall impression was of an insouciant industriousness, with earnest shopkeepers keeping vigil at their shop doors, chatting with neighbors. Women, clutching children’s hands and plastic shopping bags, meandered along the rows of shops. Chains of young
veiled women, arms linked, joyously bounced along the sidewalk, not unobserved by the lean young men lounging on street corners. People were watching, chatting, resting, flirting, all the while plying their trades, running errands, waiting for a bus or a dolmuş, proceeding toward their destinations.

One end of Ümraniye’s main street was anchored by a large, gray, concrete municipal building that housed, after 1995, the Islamist mayor and his staff. Next door was the municipality’s clinic, run by an Islamic foundation. Apartment buildings nearby were honeycombed with rooms and suites that served public functions, hosted public lectures, and served as offices for an Islamic charity foundation and as Welfare Party regional headquarters. Municipal representatives fanned out and distributed full-color brochures and magazines to the shopkeepers of Ümraniye, praising municipal projects and showing off the civic deeds of Welfare Party officials. On a landing in a nearby building, people waited to be taken by Islamic foundation staff to the depot where they could select used winter clothing and furniture for their families. The foundation kept a neat bookcase of binders documenting the neighborhood’s poor families and their needs. Volunteers worked with corporate donors to distribute food and coal. They helped people find housing, jobs, and even spouses, and to pay
for weddings and circumcision ceremonies. Party activists referred to the foundation those neighbors they believed were in need.

The Women's Branch of the Ümraniye Welfare Party occupied an office down a side street. The head of the Women's Branch was a heavyset woman in a navy-blue coat and matching scarf. Two mobile telephones in her capacious handbag demanded her attention at frequent intervals. Nearly half of the more than fifty thousand registered Welfare Party members in Ümraniye were women, she told me. Although in the mid-1990s women were not represented at high administrative levels in the party, they developed their own political and civic networks and organizations and took leadership positions within them. The Ümraniye Women’s Branch had fifteen representatives in each of the neighborhood’s twenty districts. The activists organized fundraising activities and political demonstrations, ran discussion groups in people’s homes, and regularly visited neighborhood women to offer assistance or simply company. They set up courses and conferences to educate other activists about the party’s principles and activist techniques. “We can do more than the men. They’re not as active.” As the head of Ümraniye’s Women’s Branch bustled out to attend a meeting with regional representatives, one of her mobile telephones rang, a Welfare Party official summoning her to make an appearance elsewhere.

Several blocks away, in a third-story walk-up, the Ümraniye Women’s Center held classes in cloth painting for neighborhood women. Several years before, these secularist, Kemalist activists had run volunteer-staffed People’s Schools with assistance from the left-of-center Republican People’s Party (RPP) and the then RPP-run municipality. The People’s Schools were successful at bringing together a variety of participants, both conservative and liberal, and crossing age and class lines, but this success was not sustained after the activists opened the Women’s Center.

The Kemalist and Islamist activists were similar in many ways. They exhibited in their activities a proselytizing fervor and strong ideological commitment. Both were grassroots groups active in Ümraniye, led by local activists, not outsiders. Both depended on face-to-face interactions, building on local networks of people sharing a history of trust. Both had ill-defined and complex links to formal party and municipal structures and civic organizations. Despite these similarities, the Islam-inspired group was much more successful in mobilizing the local population within a sustained social move-
ment. The secularist group, in contrast, after its initial success with the People’s Schools, did not seem able to mobilize a great deal of local support.

One major difference between them was the Kemalists’ strong belief in “modernity,” specifically a Kemalist interpretation of modernity characterized by an emphasis on the superiority of individualistic, goal-seeking behavior over deference to “traditional” forms of family and communal authority—especially when the latter converged with Islamic doctrine about the place of women in the home, in relations within the family, and vis-à-vis men. The activists clearly perceived themselves as pioneers bringing modernity to the neighborhood, and were as concerned with providing services aimed at protecting women and making them more self-reliant as with spreading the Kemalist message. Although themselves residents of Ümraniye, members of the group allied themselves, through their clothing and their message of Kemalist modernism, with the Kemalist elite, whose laicist, secularist, Western-oriented definition of modernity has been until recently the only legitimate key to social status and acceptance by the political and economic elite. As a result of this alliance with Kemalist ideology and practice, their message took on a top-down cast.

In other words, although their method of mobilization consisted of a grassroots, personalized approach, like that of the Islamists, the Ümraniye secularists did not situate their message in local cultural values and forms. Thus, while they were able to tap into local networks, they were unable to orient them toward their cause in a self-sustaining movement. Although they practiced informal, face-to-face politics, in the end they did not practice a vernacular politics that would have bridged local hierarchies and fractures and tied local to national interests in a sustainable movement like that of the Islamists.

**Practicing Community**

This new politics changed the face of local politics, quite literally. It crossed ethnic, class, and gender lines to an unheard of extent. It was not simply a politics of the poor, but drew people from different social classes and educational and professional backgrounds, both men and women, as well as people of different ethnic identifications and regional origins. Vernacular politics in Turkey is based on local networks of people united within a complex set of norms of mutu-
These widely shared norms require people to assist one another in open-ended relations of reciprocity, without calculating immediate return. A history of such relations builds up trust and mutual obligations that are powerful forms of social solidarity, integrating not just family members and people from the same region of origin, but neighbors with no other ties except those of local proximity. “Trust,” Robert Putnam writes, “lubricates cooperation. . . . And cooperation breeds trust” (1993, 171). But how does trust based on personal interaction fit into the civic and political mobilization of large numbers of unrelated and diverse people?

The Islamist activists in Turkey tapped into this, in effect, by mobilizing people one by one to act within what they called “cells” (hücreler). A cell consists of people who share an intimate history of trust. Cells are based on preexisting networks. Linked to one another, clusters of cells easily constitute a mass movement. They are national without losing the mobilizational power of local, primary identification. These cells may be mobilized around a shared ideological focus within a social movement. Once politicized, they act as a conduit for participation in civic life and in party politics. Thus, civic and political association does not need to trade the force of primary identification for the breadth of mass mobilization.

Islamic principles support the values of trust and mutual obligation; these are also an organic part of the organization of social and economic life. They take on greater importance in politics in neighborhoods where state and civic institutions have been unreliable mediators. Not surprisingly, interpersonal relations based on reciprocity and trust have been key to political mobilization in heavily migrant neighborhoods, but it is a mistake to assume that these are simply rural forms of association that will eventually be replaced by more “modern,” individualistic, associational forms commonly associated with civil society.

Although scholars have pointed to the prevalence of collectivism and norms of reciprocity as attributes of urban middle-class as well as rural Turks, these characteristics are still associated by many “modernist” Turks with rural Turkey and with rural migrants in urban squatter areas. In reality, differentiations like rural from urban and squatter areas from the “city” proper have become increasingly meaningless, as characteristic forms of clothing, lifestyle, and architecture continually change and develop hybrid forms. The differences that do affect the look and feel of a neighborhood and the style
and lifestyle choices of its inhabitants often are ones of income, education, and opportunity.

It is important to remember that people involved in local network politics perceive themselves as practicing community, not just doing politics. That is the source of their movement’s strength and its autonomy from political and civic institutions. Self-interest and rational choice are downplayed (although clearly never entirely absent), while kinship, religion, and communal identity act powerfully to enforce reciprocity and communal solidarity.

This political process has had two effects on the party at the national level. First, it has challenged the authoritarian, centralized, top-down paternalism of the political system, and has empowered a new generation of politicians that constituents perceive to be “just like us.” The populist image of these politicians is rooted in community network politics, giving them direct access to popular support, thus potentially bypassing the party and civic institutions that generally act as liaisons between party leaders and constituents. This autonomy from institutional mediation comes at a price: party leaders must allow community politics to lead, not follow. This means pulling the sometimes unruly local groups with their contradictory positions and goals into an effective national political agenda. The autonomy of the local political process from its institutional bedfellows also means that the fate of a social movement rooted in this political process is not linked to the fate of the political party that has carried its message to the national level. In other words, closing the party has little effect on the strength or resilience of the movement, which can simply look around for another institutional vehicle.

Second, local network politics has imported into the party the contradictory evaluations and competing motivations of the communities empowered by this alternative political process. The differences and contradictions within the movement are not immediately apparent, especially when the party invokes a unifying rhetoric of religious ideology and emphasizes certain social and political issues, like freedom of religious expression. The party faithful at mass rallies and demonstrations appear in an iconic Islamic style of dress that for its part submerges status and regional differences.

The sheer variety of supporters and activists, however, means that there is a corresponding diversity of motivations, goals, interpretations, and positions on the issues. Not all elements of the Islamist movement gravitate toward the same party. Participants
organize themselves within a variety of institutions, from informal networks to associations and foundations, and under different leaders. These groups may work in tandem or at cross-purposes in terms of their political and social goals. Moreover, the contradictions inherent in the different social contexts of participants (as worker or industrialist, uneducated or intellectual, old or young, poor or upwardly mobile, woman or man) resurface as quite different expectations and interpretations of the goals and platform of the political party they might support as activists.

Finally, economic and status divisions within the Islamist movement have led to the development of an Islamist elitism that potentially undercuts the movement’s link with local cultural norms and the party’s populist image. Islamist elites have attempted to attach a higher social status to material styles and lifestyles, like veiling and gender segregation, that represent the movement. To maintain this distinction from everyday practice, they have tried to differentiate Islamist practice as “conscious” and, therefore, superior to the presumably unconscious adherence to “tradition” imputed to local practitioners. They also have tried to legitimate the authenticity of Islamist practices by attributing to them a genealogical relation to practices of the Ottoman period. This neo-Ottomanism gives an illusion of temporal depth to Islamist practices, but also encourages Islamist elitism by identifying Islamist practices with those of the Ottoman court, not the masses. Most notably, middle-class Islamist women have begun to develop recognizably different versions of Islamic dress and lifestyle, advertised as Ottoman-derived, that allow them to retain their class distinction while remaining within the movement.

**The Islamist Phenomenon**

Islamists are Muslims who, rather than accept an inherited Muslim tradition, have developed their own self-conscious vision of Islam, which is then brought to bear on social and political events within a particular national context. This has occurred in a twentieth-century context of transnational discourse and debate about Muslim practices, fueled by mass education, mass communication, and the spread of global capitalism and media. Mass education played an important role, allowing ordinary people access to key theological texts like the Quran, rather than only trained specialists, the ulama. These new
interpretations have wide distribution in other Muslim societies through publications on the world market and by means of cassette, Internet, and other media. Some attribute the Islamist phenomenon to dissatisfaction with a perceived lack of values and community accompanying the spread of globalization.

Interpretations vary with the interpreter, with liberal, modernist readings competing with restrictive positions on the characteristics of a proper Muslim life. Central components of an ideal Muslim society that appear prominently in Islamist rhetoric—obligation to authority, communal solidarity, and social justice—are contested among Muslims as to what they entail in practice. Modernization, social mobility, the influence of the media, and the role played by religion in political mobilization increasingly allow tradition to be apprehended as a set of resources and choices. Therefore, different conditions and contexts fragment the religious and political imaginations of Islamist activists and movements.4

Turkey’s experience is exceptional in that education does not grant direct access to the theological literature, which is still memorized and recited in Arabic, since the Quran was dictated to the Prophet Muhammed in that language. Translated, the Quran would no longer be “the word of God.” Most Turks have no knowledge of the Arabic language and rely for Quranic interpretation on the sermons, lessons, or published Turkish-language works of their religious teachers. There are lively debates among Islamist intellectuals who either are able to read and understand the Quran or have access to internationally circulated interpretations. Turkish Islamist intellectuals also have brought into their debates wide-ranging literatures from Western social and political sciences. Perhaps it is this disconnect between Islamist elites and the masses that, in Turkey, makes the Islamist movement more dependent on cultural, rather than ideological, forms of mobilization.

The study of the Islamist phenomenon in Turkey generally has reflected two strategies. One approach has been the analysis of the political ideology of Islamist or Islam-inspired political parties or organizations and their role in the development of Turkish political life (Gülalp, 1999a; Yavuz, 1997), and of the ideas, backgrounds, and intellectual histories of leading figures (Mardin, 1989; Meeker, 1994; Yavuz, 1993, 1999a). A second approach traces how the cultural politics of the Islamist movement has opened up a world of Islamic style and consumerism, intellectual jockeying in Islamic publications, and
other manifestations of a struggle to attribute social status to Islamic symbols and lifestyle (Göle, 1996; Navaro-Yashin, 2002).

Scholars and pundits alike are interested in the much debated issues of whether Islam and democracy are compatible and the relation of Islam to modernity. Turkey is perceived to be an important test case for the intersection of Islam and political practice because it has a laicist government with a history of electoral politics, along with viable Islamic parties and organizations that have become politicized and, to some extent, influenced by transnational trends. Violent attacks on the state and on Muslim and non-Muslim minorities by radical militant Islamists (Muslims who use Islam-based connections and Islamic rhetoric politically, with the aim of overthrowing the system) in places like Iran, Algeria, Egypt, and elsewhere lend weight to the suspicion that Islam-inspired political practice is fundamentally incompatible with democracy. No less important is the position of the laicist Turkish state. According to the Chief Prosecutor of the Constitutional Court, Vural Savaş, speaking in reference to the banning of the Welfare Party, “Islam and democracy cannot coexist and indeed one is against the other” (Mercan and Belge, 1997, A6). Typically, analysis and debate of these issues rely on Islamist rhetoric, publications, and the activities of organizations. This has the unintended impact of defining politics only from above, from its literate and vocal purveyors, rather than from below, from the perspectives of practitioners. In fact, important solidarities that emerge in local discourse will be missed when parsing the ideological rhetoric of Islamist groups. For instance, Islamist officials and activists in Ümraniye consistently emphasized neighborliness (see chapter 5). To neighborliness they attached values (like norms of reciprocity and mutual assistance) that commonly defined relations among kin and fellow villagers. Neighborliness and its associated values—and ultimately, neighborliness as a basis for political action—were given further legitimacy by reference to religious doctrine. In fact, doctrine and organization were intertwined with cultural values and practice.

Because a top-down analysis relies on a formal “party” approach, it cannot account for activists’ belief that the Welfare Party’s demise did not matter. Since opponents of the Islamists see the Islamist movement as a derivation of the party or a creation of outside agitators, or simply as irtica, a reactionary political response, they imagine that, once the party is eliminated, a malleable society would be rein-
stated. However, they fail to appreciate that institutions are products of the underlying society. Then the political party, in a sense, is peripheral to the movement, although each may advance the other’s interests. Without an appreciation of vernacular politics that pays attention to the demands and motivations of those segments of society supporting an Islamist movement, as well as to the political ideology and structure of the party, the Islamist movement’s independence of formal structures, and, thus, its broad mobilizing potential, cannot be appreciated. In the following chapters, I will examine such claims of autonomy and show how vernacular politics allows for a more complete understanding of the political process.

These concerns influence the layout of the book. I will explore vernacular politics from both local and national perspectives. In order to give centrality to the everyday, readers will not find a discussion of Islamist political parties until chapter 3. Chapter 1 offers a historical perspective on the characteristics, economic status, and lifestyles of the people involved in the Islamist movement—and its political counterpart, Kemalism. Urbanization and economic and political developments over the past two decades are seen to have played a decisive role in the development of new, horizontal, urban networks. Chapter 2 is an ethnographic limning of life in Ümraniye, introducing the families of Islamist activists and revealing how Islam, migration, economic status, gender, and politics are inextricably interwoven in everyday life and, by extension, in the Islamist movement.

Chapter 3 describes the diversity of religious belief and expression in Turkey at the national level and explores the complicated relationship of Islamists and Kemalists to Islam. Chapter 4 analyzes the divisions within Welfare and its successor, the Virtue Party. Differences in religious beliefs, ideological interpretations, and styles of relating to institutions and supporters are given a further twist by generational differences that threaten to tear the party apart. Chapter 5 takes us to the offices of the Welfare municipality in Ümraniye to examine the nature of its populist appeal. At party-sponsored events, politics is personalized and the party’s ideological message situated firmly within local cultural norms. Chapter 6 continues to examine the vernacular politics of the Islamist movement from the point of view of the activists and describes the latitude of their autonomy. Chapter 7 pushes the discussion of hybridity and internal contradiction further by considering the contradictions between the expecta-
tions, goals and interpretations of male and female activists, and the
development of an Islamist elitism which undermines the move-
ment’s populist appeal. Such strengths and weaknesses emerge with
greater contrast in the final chapter, in which Islamist mobilization
in Ümraniye is compared with the efforts of a local secularist, Kemalist group.

**Vernacular Politics**

To sum up, vernacular politics incorporates what one might expect to
be discrete and even contradictory forms of organization and bases
for solidarity. Thus, individualism may not be a necessary component
of civil society, and interpersonal bonds of trust and mutual obliga-
tion, conceived on a foundation of local cultural and religious soli-
darities, seem to serve quite well as building blocks for “modern”
civic and political life. Against expectations, civil society cannot be
assumed to guarantee liberalism, but rather may be cast in the serv-
ice of ideological political institutions, while still maintaining its
autonomy. Religious ideology, dissolved in the acid of local interpre-
tation, flows to fill the glasses of competing interests. Finally, informal grassroots politics of the kind so richly described by Singerman
(1995) for Cairo and Bayat (1997) for Tehran may become the engine
of a national movement or political party without losing either its
informality or its local autonomy.

Indeed, it is in the transgressions of vernacular politics against
conventional scholarly differentiations—religious and political ide-
ologies embedded in local culture, civil society and political party
organization based on local solidarities and interpersonal relations—
that one finds the basis for Islamist success in mobilizing a varied
population. It explains how the movement sustains political momen-
tum despite the internal differences supporters bring with them, and
despite attempts at suppression by the Turkish state and military. At
its heart, vernacular politics is a value-centered political process root-
ed in local culture, interpersonal relations, and community networks,
yet connected through civic organizations to national party politics.

But it is also true that the facade of homogeneity—expressed in
ideological rhetoric and as shared symbolic forms, and apparent in
the sight of masses in lockstep at demonstrations and rallies, or coor-
dinating their efforts in organizational meetings and activities (like
c Charity work and political organizing)—is itself undermined by the
differing interests, motivations, and goals of participants. Working-
class, merchant, and elite supporters, and men and women activists,
each conceive of religious ideology within the context of their every-
day needs, motivations, and desires.

What, then, mobilizes and sustains such a movement? In Turkey,
as elsewhere, religion does play a role. But it is religion as local cul-
tural idiom played out through social and political structures, and
rarely religion as a philosophically thought-out and coherent ideolo-
gy or political agenda. Islamic ideology embedded in a vernacular
politics draws on more than religiosity. This is the key to the move-
ment's strength and resilience, since it allows people to be mobilized
across a spectrum of personal religiosity and beliefs.

In other words, vernacular politics is not simply Islamic pop-
ulism, but rather a political process available to other parties and pur-
veyors of other ideologies as well. This would require, however, that
these parties acknowledge the role of cultural norms in political
mobilizing, rather than simply conducting business as usual, engag-
ing in top-down campaigning and bidding for local loyalties by estab-
lishing themselves as patrons, or allying themselves with local patrons
who are then expected to “deliver” the votes of their clients. It
requires instead that political behavior be seen as embedded in cul-
ture, including religious values as practiced in local contexts, rather
than as a separable behavior modified by an ideological prefix—as in
Muslim politics or Islamic populism—which refers to, but does not
incorporate within political behavior, the lived variety of Islamic
practice.