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Conquering versus democratizing the state: political Islamists and fourth wave democratization in Turkey and Tunisia

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ABSTRACT

What do we learn from Turkey and Tunisia regarding the relationship between political Islamism and democratization? Variables identified by current research such as autonomy, “moderation”, and cooperation with secular actors can cut both ways depending on various political-institutional conditions and prerogatives. Particularly, the article argues that preoccupation with “conquering the state from within as opposed to democratizing it” has been a key priority and intervening variable undermining the democratizing potential of the main Turkish and Tunisian political Islamic actors – primarily the AKP and Ennahda. These actors have prioritized acceptance by and ownership of their respective nation states over other goals and strategies, such as revolutionary takeover or Islamization of the state and confrontations with state elites. This has led to a relative neglect of designing and building institutions, whether for Islamic or democratic transformation. Hence, while contributing to democratization at various stages, these actors have a predisposition to adopt and regenerate, reframe and at times augment the authoritarian properties of their states. Research should ask how secular and religious actors can agree on institutions of vertical and horizontal state accountability that would help to address the past and present sources of the interest of political Islamists in conquering rather than democratizing the state.

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Introduction

In order to explain the behaviour of religious political actors during democratization struggles, current research highlights variables such as autonomy from state, penetration of society, “moderation”, and ability to cooperate with secular actors.¹ In terms of these variables, the main religious actors in Turkey and Tunisia – pending a more elaborate discussion, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey and the Ennahda Party in Tunisia – should have considerable potential to contribute to the democratizations of their countries.

The political theologies of these actors have been quite malleable and pragmatic, responsive to liberal and pro-democratic ideas and discourses, and relatively open to

reinterpreting religious orthodoxy and orthopraxy.² Both countries have traditions of Islam many commentators have hailed as relatively tolerant and flexible.³ In so far as they were not part of the state Islam discussed below, they developed significant financial and organizational autonomy from their respective states, even though, especially, Turkish Islamists simultaneously cultivated symbiotic relations with the state. They are credited with having built highly effective grassroots movements and strong links with society.⁴ They have demonstrated considerable ability to cooperate with secular political actors. Furthermore, many scholars have praised them for their “post-Islamist” orientation and for their argued ability to harmonize Islam, pluralism, and democracy on ideational grounds.⁵ Indeed, these actors have at various stages supported their countries’ democratizations in significant ways.

The record, however, is highly mixed. In addition to their democratic contributions, these actors have been criticized for their exclusionary behaviour and discourses and a tendency to compromise with authoritarian state structures. What’s more, in recent years Turkey has been undergoing a drastic democratic reversal under AKP governments.⁶ The dramatic coup attempt in July 2016, which seems to have involved members of the Islamic Gülen movement, shocked insiders and outside observers alike. The government had long supported and worked together with Gülenists, but in recent years has been accusing them, among other alleged crimes, of trying to seize the state from inside.

What explains this discrepancy between theoretical expectations and actual performance and what does all this say about the way we should conceptualize and theorize the relationship between political Islamism and democratization?

This article develops the thesis that Turkish and Tunisian Islamists seem to share a characteristic, which appears to be a key intervening variable undermining or reversing the democratic potentials of political Islamic actors. At least partially in response to their countries’ respective histories and processes of pro-secular nation-state building, these actors seem to have developed a prerogative, which may be described as “preoccupation with conquering the state as opposed to democratizing it.”

Pending more elaborate discussion later, suffice it to say here that these actors seem to prioritize gaining the acceptance of state elites and the ownership of their respective nation states over alternative goals and strategies, such as confronting state elites and pursuing revolutionary takeover or radical remaking of the state. This is not to say that other goals, such as various understandings of Islamization and democratization, are necessarily absent or unimportant. But these other objectives seem to remain vaguely and flexibly defined and secondary to the ideal of state conquest. The thesis here develops and complements related arguments in recent research such as “moderation as compromise with a country’s center”, “statism”, and “bargained competition” as I will expand on below.⁷

Hence, Turkish and Tunisian religious actors can have considerable democratizing potential as predicted by extant theories, but this is a contingent capacity. Like their secular counterparts, they can contribute to both authoritarianism and democratization. In order to better gauge their democratizing potential in terms of the argument developed here, it may be useful to work with a conceptualization of democratization that highlights state accountability. As we will see, more often than not, Turkish and Tunisian political Islamists appear to have been preoccupied with the question of who controls and represents the state rather than the question of how to make the state more responsive and accountable, whoever governs it.

Hence, by drawing on relevant definitions, democratization can be conceptualized as a continuous and non-linear process of social and political-institutional changes. These should bring about an increasingly more equal and democratic relationship between a state and its people by developing a well-working balance of vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms, among other ways.⁸ This definition makes clear that democratization requires meaningful, lasting, and inclusive transformations in a state's ideology as well as institutional-organizational setup. Moreover, these transformations should improve its level of accountability and nature of interactions (from coercion to dialogue and accommodation) with its citizens.

Even though Turkey and Tunisia both have had democratic achievements in their own ways, both countries to differing degrees suffer from severe democratic deficits in terms of this definition of democratization. The “strong states” in these countries have maintained their insufficiently transparent structures and their ability to violate rights and freedoms. Furthermore, the main religious actors in these countries – like many secular actors – have not been inclined to effectively address these critical deficits. This has been true, for example in the case of Turkey's AKP, even during periods when they made significant contributions to democratization through major legal-political reforms and greater responsiveness to selected societal groups. A major inhibitor has been their propensity to pursue state conquest rather than state democratization. Hence, in order to evaluate the democratization potential of religious actors, I would argue, it is insufficient to merely ask whether or not they support democracy or human rights as general concepts. It should be interrogated through which specific institutional changes and concrete policies they propose to enhance the vertical and horizontal accountability of the state, which would make formal improvements in areas such as minority rights and civic freedoms both feasible and sustainable in the long run.

Turkish and Tunisian Islamists and the notion of state conquest

Disregarding major differences such as different levels of economic development, size, and geopolitical context, both the Turkish (est. 1923) and Tunisian (est. 1956) nation states are relatively “strong states” with influential state institutions and traditions. They harbour unequal and transformative powers vis-à-vis their societies.⁹ These powers were used by secularist actors who dominated both states during relatively long and transformative periods of state-led and pro-secular social-cultural and institutional modernization/westernization. Hence, in relation to other Arab countries, “the secular nature of the Tunisian institutional context” makes it among the most comparable to the case of Turkey, despite certain differences.¹⁰ The main Islamic actors suffered various degrees of social and political exclusion, which generated deep-cutting secular-Islamic rifts and a sense of alienation among pious and Islamist groups.

Simultaneously and to differing degrees, the interventionist ideologies and institutional setups of the Turkish and Tunisian states vis-à-vis religion have not entirely been opposed to the mainly “national” Islamization projects drawn up by the dominant Turkish and Tunisian Islamists. When secularist actors dominate these institutions, they may look staunchly secular. But when managed by Islamists, the same interventionist powers can be utilized for promoting social-political Islamization and for reversing social-cultural westernization. At various times, both states tried to develop and co-opt nationalist versions of Islamism.¹¹ Undoubtedly, these policies were partially

intended to *contain* political Islamism, socialism, or both. But they were conceivable and possible because both regimes are based on particular models of state-religion relationship. While upholding “laicism” as a major legal-ideological principle, these models have also enabled these states to intervene in religious affairs so as to both restrict Islam and promote ostensibly secularism-friendly versions of “state Islam”.¹²

Hence, Islamists held a sense of alienation from their states in both cases primarily because of their relative *political* exclusion from, and the secular *identity* or image of, state institutions. Following nationalist struggles to which they significantly contributed, they felt rejected by mainstream society and secular-westernizing elites. They were not necessarily estranged because they rejected their states and opposed the unaccountable state institutions, or because their states excluded Islam *per se*.¹³ Islamists believed that they were the true and dispossessed owners, or leading elites, of the state, and sooner or later it would be returned to them.

A legacy of this historical context seems to be that “compromising with and conquering the state from within” and likewise conquering the secular social-political institutions became deeply desired prizes for Islamists. As a result, the goal of state conquest prevails over both what may be called an “Islamist project”, that is, a revolutionary takeover of the state in the name of Islamization, and what may be called a democratic-transformative project, that is, a democratization of the authoritarian state by changing the state-society relation on which it is based among other ways via reforming and remaking institutions of horizontal and vertical accountability.

Undoubtedly, the goal of state conquest does not necessarily make Islamists abandon other objectives, and state conquest itself may serve these other goals Islamists continue to harbour and pursue, such as various understandings and degrees of Islamization, democratization, religious liberties, and economic benefits. But the thesis here is that these other objectives remain relatively ambiguous, flexible, and subordinate to the goal of conquering the state. Furthermore, their preoccupation with reclaiming rather than democratizing the state renders religious actors less inclined to fight against and/or try to reform the fundamental orientation of their states towards their citizens.

The conceptualization and argument here complement several related concepts and theses. One is “statism”: accepting “institutionalized participation in the nation-state” (instead of pursuing universal, for example, “Ikhwanī” Islamist priorities), and focusing on challenging “the claims of the (usually more secularized) establishment to speak for the nation”.¹⁴

Notions of statism usefully distinguish between state-oriented strategies focusing on politics and bottom-up strategies focusing on social activism. They also depict how many Islamists are concerned with challenging secular state elites and how they thereby think and operate within the paradigm of the nation state.¹⁵ However, by itself the concept of statism does not necessarily capture many Islamists’ long-term ambitions to conquer the state and how this affects the strategies they use in different political contexts and at different phases of democratization. Furthermore, it may draw a misleading opposition between “statist” and “social activism-oriented” strategies, which are often mutually supportive.¹⁶ Religious actors’ will to replace the secular elite in their role of “speaking for the nation” includes an eagerness to replace secular intelligentsia and social elites, which encourages social activism at both elite and grass-roots levels. In turn, “institutionalized participation in the nation-state” helps faith-

based groups to expand their impact in the social sector, which in turn translates into greater political success.¹⁷ Conquering the nation-state apparatus provides advantages in social activism through government favouritism, clientelism, and formal and informal agreements between the public sector and religious civil society. As a result, the latter often loses its autonomy by developing symbiotic interdependencies with the state.

Another related concept especially insightful during the phase of democratic transition is “bargained competition” (between Islamists and authoritarian elites): “bargaining on their mutual reintegration and their monopolization of the post-revolutionary political scene while fiercely competing over political resources through various (often informal) power-sharing arrangements” rather than “building institutions”.¹⁸

“Bargained competition”, however, does not describe other strategies Islamists may use at various stages of democratization depending on the political and institutional checks and balances. When Islamists’ primary concern is with state conquest as I argue here, different strategies may be chosen in pursuit of this goal based on the political context. For example, when Islamists are constrained by strong checks and balances, the will to be included in mainstream institutions may lead them to focus on bargained competition and the gradual packing of state institutions. When political opportunities are more permissive, however, the will to conquer the state from within may encourage them to adopt more direct counter-elite strategies to sideline, purge, and replace secular elites. Finally, many Islamists tend to harbour a distaste for horizontal accountability mechanisms (such as powerful constitutional courts and autonomous bureaucracies) arguably because they were usually exposed to them in the form of authoritarian and “anti-majoritarian” barriers¹⁹ secularist elites built to prevent them from conquering the state. But this dislike limits their practical ability to construct pluralist democratic systems based on division of powers even when they genuinely want to uphold rights and freedoms.

Religious actors’ pursuit of state conquest creates both opportunities for democratization and autocratic tendencies. On the one hand, it may make Islamists more open to power-sharing and compromising with secular actors dominating the state. On the other hand, by being so they may also become more likely to embrace the authoritarian features of their countries’ mainstream society and politics.²⁰ In other words, they may be understood as “moderate” in the following sense: willingness to compromise and cooperate with the mainstream actors and values that represent the political-institutional, social, and international “center” of their respective countries.²¹

Since the preoccupation with state conquest generates both democratic and authoritarian tendencies, it can be argued that institutions of vertical and horizontal state accountability may make the difference. Such institutions and formal arrangements of power-sharing between secular and religious elites may allow Islamists to take part in the ownership of the state while checking the ability of any government to use these powers to exclude others. Otherwise, Islamic actors may fail to lead a genuine “passive revolution”²² beyond serving the interests of a religious “counter-elite”.

The AKP and Ennahda do not represent all Islamists in these countries. Tunisian salafi and jihadi groups pursue more Muslim-universalist and relatively more doctrinaire projects.²³ In Turkey, while jihadi groups multiplied following the Syrian civil war, a smaller party directly continuing the “National Outlook” political Islam tradition and a plethora of Sufi movements and pious foundations exist.²⁴ The latter includes the Gülen faith-based movement, which was implicated in the coup attempt of July 2016

and has been accused by the AKP of penetrating the state apparatus for years in order to control it from within. The fact that Gülenists and the AKP had previously been major allies suggests that the pursuit of state conquest may give rise to partnerships as well as competition over resources and power, conflicts and fallouts among conquest-seeking Islamist groups.

Periodization and logic of the comparison

The cases of Turkey and Tunisia during the 2000s help to examine the behaviour of political Islamists and the role of preoccupation with state conquest at different levels of democratization and different degrees of experience with competitive politics.

A newcomer to electoral democracy, Tunisia ended a long period of autocratic rule only recently, following the Arab uprisings, which began in 2010 in Tunisia.²⁵ Before that, the experience of Tunisian political Islamists with democracy had been limited to short-lived periods of political liberalization and illicit, informal, and grassroots political mobilization.²⁶ Hence, democratic transition in Tunisia simply refers to transition to electoral democracy.

Before coming to and then consolidating power, Turkey's political Islamists had also been subjected to severe restrictions under Turkey's restrictive-secularist constitutional order. By comparison, however, their experience with competitive politics had been much longer and more extensive than their Tunisian counterparts, Turkey having been an electoral democracy with periodic military interventions since 1950. Hence, the conceptualization and periodization of transition in Turkey is a more challenging task. On the surface, Turkey transitioned from its last formal military junta to electoral democracy during the 1980s and then appeared to strengthen liberal democracy between 1999 and 2005 thanks to a series of European Union (EU)-inspired legal-political reforms.²⁷ The majority of these reforms were secured under AKP governments. However, critical accounts have rightly argued that it would be more appropriate to consider Turkey as a case that had an incomplete or unsuccessful transition to electoral democracy.²⁸ This is because under the façade of competitive elections and legal-political reforms ultimate political power continued to reside with the military due to the enduring military tutelage. Hence, without underestimating the importance of the 1999–2005 period of democratic reforms, the following analysis conceptualizes the subsequent period of 2008–2010 as the period of actual democratic transition. This is because the balance of ultimate political power²⁹ seemed to shift from the military to the AKP-led civilian government in the latter period, even though, as we will see, this did not necessarily produce a successful democratic transition either, among other reasons, due to preoccupation with state conquest.

Table 1 summarizes these ideas and periodizes the comparison.

Erosion of authoritarian regime

Ennahda played primarily passive but in the long-run critical roles during the erosion of the authoritarian regime. Ennahda did not directly confront the regime during this phase. But it invested in building grassroots support, softened its Islamist demands and was open to cooperation with secular opposition.

Ben Ali alienated key constituencies including women, the business community (especially small- and medium-size enterprises), the army, the judiciary, and even his

Table 1. Comparative periodization of fourth wave democratization in Turkey and Tunisia.

	Erosion of authoritarian regime	First phase of democratic transition (fall of authoritarian regime)	Second phase of democratic transition (successful transition, consolidation, or reversal)
Tunisia	2000s Critical challenges of democratization: Uniting and mobilizing opposition; finding space to organize; weakening the domestic and international legitimacy of the autocratic regime; possible liberalization	Dec. 2010–Oct. 2011 (Elections for Constituent Assembly) Critical challenges of democratization: Bringing down the Ben Ali regime and allowing multiparty politics	Oct. 2011–ongoing Critical challenges of democratization: Making a new constitution and other laws, managing two turnovers of government through free and fair elections, solving economic problems, containing religious radicalism, providing order and security, minimizing religious-secular conflict and avoiding the return of old regime
Turkey	1999–2008 Critical challenges of democratization: Political power and will to challenge the military-bureaucratic establishment; political and discursive strategies to weaken its domestic and external support; securing EU-led legal-institutional reforms; resolving the Kurdish conflict and overcoming religious-secular polarization	2008–2010 Critical challenges of democratization: Subdue the military, the “deep state” and the military-bureaucratic tutelage without undermining rule of law; resolving the Kurdish conflict and religious-secular polarization	2011–ongoing (Democratic reversal since 2015) Critical challenges of democratization: Ensuring civilian government accountability; making a new and civilian constitution with strong divisions of power; strengthening vertical and horizontal accountability; avoiding executive degradation and ruling party hegemony; maintain free and fair elections; strengthening independent-neutral judiciary and rule of law; resolving the Kurdish conflict; addressing religious people’s sense of disempowerment without excluding secular groups, engaging in revanchism and fuelling religious-secular polarization

own hegemonic RCD party.³⁰ He lost some external support as US policy in the region became more associated with democracy promotion and less supportive of autocrats. The loyal opposition weakened and “so-called secular progressive intellectuals and co-opted middle-class activists were calling for democratization from within while often remaining silent about the violent repression meted out to Islamists and the radical Left”.³¹

As a result, secularists split. Some major actors came to believe that Ben Ali posed a greater threat to their interests than Islamists did.³² This enabled Ennahda to cooperate with some pro-secular opposition actors to stage limited challenges to the regime. These cooperative experiences would later prove to be very valuable in forming coalitions and managing politics in the post-transition phases.

A major turning point was the “October 18 Coalition for Rights and Freedoms” that Ennahda forged together with secular leftist and liberal opposition actors in 2005.³³ This marked a major achievement for the Islamists in terms of securing acceptance by secular political actors. Some secular actors overcame their suspicions that the

Islamists were disingenuous democrats; they agreed to include the Islamists in the coalition in order to “impel them toward realism”.³⁴ Following a month-long hunger strike in Tunis, the coalition agreed on common demands and principles “to end dictatorship”. These efforts reflected “the long-cherished hope (of the opposition) that by rallying around basic claims, a balance could be reached between the opposition party ... and the opposition forces which remained disparate and hindered by their internal and external disputes”.³⁵

The alliance brought about little short-term regime change at the time. However, its long-term consequences were very important. After the fall of Ben Ali, the two parties with which Ennahda formed a coalition government had been its partners in the 2005 coalition: the liberal Congress for the Republic (CPR) and social-democratic Ettakatol. The October 18 coalition had some precedence: these three parties together with the Progressive Democratic Party also agreed in 2003 on a “call from Tunisia” which outlined such principles as popular sovereignty, respect for Arab-Muslim values, religious liberty and gender equality.³⁶ These investments in “political dialogue and bridge building between secularists and Islamist [opposition] ... laid the foundation for collaboration during (and after) the revolution”.³⁷

After its first free and fair elections and transition to democracy in 1950, Turkey suffered four democratic reversals resulting from military interventions, in 1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997. After each intervention, multiparty politics was resumed fairly rapidly (the longest interruption being the 1980–1983 military rule). But this was a guided democracy in two main respects. The military’s role as the final arbiter of politics was institutionalized, especially with respect to sensitive issues of “state security”, which included the perceived threat of “Islamist reactionism”. Formal and informal rules helped secular-republican groups dominate high-level state institutions and granted them “mainstream” status in leading sectors of society such as the media and academia.³⁸ Meanwhile, state-interventionist policies of laicism – since the state was dominated by secular actors – fostered a sense of “inequality” among the Islamists and the pious and this feeling of dispossession became part of Turkey’s democratic deficit.

In 1997, a military-inspired secularist campaign forced the Islamist-led coalition government out of power. Against this background, the erosion of the authoritarian regime in Turkey meant the removal of the authoritarian and authoritarian-secular constraints on electoral democracy.

Religious actors’ contribution to weakening authoritarianism was initially limited to the development of a political discourse – together with liberal secular actors and other critiques – critical of the military tutelage and of “authoritarian secularism”.³⁹ Similar to Tunisia, the weakening of authoritarianism resulted from external developments and the regime’s internal dynamics. It began with a reformist period triggered by Turkey’s official EU candidacy and the capture of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) leader in 1999.

Under a coalition government consisting of centre-left, centre-right, and far-right parties, EU-inspired legal-political reforms and cessation of military clashes in the Kurdish conflict expanded the space for civilian politics. A possible path emerged for consolidation of pluralistic democracy via EU integration. During this time, Islamists were regrouping and restructuring following the 1997 coup and crackdown. The AKP was founded by reformist or “moderate” National Outlook Islamists in 2001.

The 2001 financial crisis, the gravest economic meltdown in the nation's history, critically changed the course of politics. Islamists began to play an important role when the coalition government fixed the economy, restructured financial institutions, and handed over power to the AKP in snap elections at the end of 2002, in which voters left all the parties of the coalition government outside parliament.

AKP governments did not initially confront military-bureaucratic tutelage. Instead, they focused on gaining the trust of domestic and international secular elites. They did so by successfully continuing EU-inspired reforms, emphasizing economic development, and remaining largely silent on sensitive issues such as religion's public role and the status of the military. In any case, their power was checked and balanced by the secular president, opposition parties, mainstream media, and the military. However, this was not a period when "state conquest" was abandoned. Rather, it was concentrated on the gradual packing of the judiciary, autonomous state institutions, and bureaucracy, and on expanding the Islamist base in business, the media, and civil society.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, with respect to many aspects of democratization, this was a period of partial democratization. It was marked by EU-guided reforms, economic growth, and a foreign policy based on developing mutually beneficial relations with neighbours.

All this convinced many scholars to hail the AKP as Turkey's "new Muslim democrats" in categorical terms and based on the party's ostensible ideology and identity.⁴¹ The ongoing policy of state conquest and the contingent political-institutional conditions underpinning the AKP's policies were insufficiently interrogated.

First phase of democratic transition

In Tunisia, the first phase of democratic transition covers the toppling of Ben Ali through a popular uprising in 2011. Religious actors did not play a prominent role, at least initially. The revolts were overwhelmingly "civil and non-religious". Even though Islamists were among the best organized opposition forces, they mostly avoided the street.⁴² Many Islamists and the pious were certainly involved. But secular leftists, liberals, women, disgruntled masses connected through social media, and Tunisia's general labour union UGTT played the leading roles in the mobilization and sustenance of the riots.⁴³ Many Ennahda leaders and activists were in jail or exile. Religious actors also shied away from activism lest this invoke the spectre of "Islamist threat" the regime had long used to legitimize authoritarianism. This relative passivity was consistent with the thesis in this article: the main Tunisian religious actors do not seek confrontational engagements with the state that might endanger their goals of conquering the state and mainstream society from within.

After Ben Ali fell, however, Ennahda became more active, and took steps that simultaneously supported and undermined democratization. On the one hand, religious actors immediately "began to mobilize the free riders"⁴⁴ of the revolutionary uprisings and thus helped to strengthen political society, which is a *sine qua non* for democratization. Ennahda and its leader Ghanoushi "traveled to the provinces, urban neighborhoods and villages to hold meetings, establish branches and networks".⁴⁵ On the other hand, Ennahda took actions and joined alliances that helped sidetrack the revolution and enabled the authoritarian regime elements to maintain their stranglehold on the system.

Ennahda politicians followed a "two-track strategy" after the revolution. They worked together with revolutionary actors such as the 14 January Front and helped

prevent Ben Ali loyalists from monopolizing political power. Simultaneously they entered into negotiations with the latter allowing them to share power while maintaining control of the state apparatus. These steps disallowed the establishment of “completely new, popular political institutions”.⁴⁶ For example, Ennahda (together with UGTT) endorsed as the interim prime minister Beji Caid Essebsi, who had served as minister and head of parliament under both Bourgiba and Ben Ali and who was “clearly a creature of ancient regimes”.⁴⁷

In Turkey, the first phase of democratic transition unfolds in 2008–2010 when the AKP subdued the military via electoral successes, political manoeuvring, and legal battles wherein the government instrumentalized the law and violated due process. Helped by secular-liberal supporters in the media, academia, and civil society, the AKP and its Gülenist allies played the leading role during this phase.

The confrontation began after Turkey’s secular state elites and middle class grew increasingly uneasy about the AKP’s growing power, international support, and “creeping Islamization” in bureaucracy and politics.⁴⁸ As the end of the secularist president’s term approached, the opposition felt that the presidency had to be held by a neutral or pro-secular figure so as to check the power of the AKP.⁴⁹

For the AKP, however, capturing this highest state position to speak for the nation was indispensable for state conquest, both symbolically and politically. When the party nominated its number two politician for presidency, secular unease turned into reaction. The military announced an online ultimatum and millions of protesters attended anti-government and pro-secular “republican rallies”. The AKP held its ground, elected Gül to the presidency anyway, unilaterally prepared a new draft constitution, and lifted the Islamic headscarf ban in universities (a law later annulled by the courts).

This was a moment when the AKP and secular opposition could have advanced democratization based on consensus, among other things by democratically renegotiating state-dominated secularism.⁵⁰ Instead, political bickering escalated and the chief public prosecutor filed a lawsuit in the Constitutional Court for the party’s closure. From the point of view of power politics, this was a move by the pro-secular high judiciary to protect the dominance of the “republican alliance” within the civilian and military state apparatus.⁵¹

This dominance was ended when religious actors responded with a series of counter-moves. With the help of Gülenists within the judiciary, the AKP launched controversial lawsuits known as *Ergenekon* trials against secularist military officers, intellectuals, and civil society actors, charging them with plotting a coup. This divided the opposition into those seeing these measures as necessary to curtail military tutelage and those viewing them as conspiracies to eliminate secularist opposition.⁵²

The AKP then organized a referendum on constitutional amendments, which packaged changes that would end secularist domination of high judiciary and would reduce military autonomy, together with changes that would simply expand civil liberties.⁵³ This again split the opposition into those who viewed the changes as “insufficient but desirable for democratization” and those who suspected the government’s intentions and feared AKP hegemony. The government won the referendum with a 58% majority. Hundreds of military officers were still in jail waiting for their trials to end. Hence, power *de facto* shifted from military elites to the religious elites who held the civilian government.

Arguably because state conquest was a greater priority for political Islamists compared to state democratization, however, the subordination of the secularist military

and the sacking of secularist officers (who allegedly were at least partially replaced with pro-Gülen officers) did not necessarily mean that the military as an institution was made more transparent and accountable.⁵⁴ Nor were new institutions built to make the now more autonomous civilian governments more transparent and accountable to the public.

Democratic consolidation and de-democratization

The second phase of the Tunisian democratic transition refers to the period since the election of the Constituent Assembly. Since then, the country has been constructing the formal and informal rules of a democratic regime, made a democratic constitution, and conducted one parliamentary and one presidential election, both of which were mainly free and fair.

Religious actors contributed to democratization by taking conciliatory stands and by cooperating and sharing power with secular actors. After emerging as the first party from the elections for the Constitutional Assembly, Ennahda formed a coalition government with secular parties. In the assembly Ennahda helped to make a democratic constitution by defending parliamentary democracy, which arguably is a more promising institutional choice for a new democracy, by not insisting that Islam be the source of Tunisian law, and by accepting legal gender equality.⁵⁵

In government, Ennahda did not directly support religious radicalism. Nevertheless, gradual Islamization in bureaucracy, government religious discourse, alleged lenience towards radicalism – supported by Ennahda officials' leaked conversations with the Salafis – and the assassinations of two major secular political figures mobilized the secular opposition against the government.⁵⁶

Ennahda helped to avoid a bigger crisis and save the democratization process when it accepted mediation by the National Dialogue Quartet, a group of four powerful mainly secular civil society organizations. The government resigned after agreeing on a schedule for ratifying the new constitution and holding parliamentary and presidential elections.

In the elections, Ennahda came second to Nidaa Tounes, which was formed as a coalition of leftist and rightist secular actors and moderates of the Ben Ali regime. Ennahda joined a coalition government with Nidaa even though it was only given one ministerial post, a step in line with the priority of long-term state conquest via acceptance by state elites and access to state institutions.

Hence, Ennahda has been criticized for undermining successful democratization in this period. First, it failed to stem the growth of Salafism within and outside its own ranks. This not only threatened public security, but also fed religious-secular polarization.⁵⁷ Second, Ennahda preferred to compromise with secular state elites instead of cooperating with revolutionary actors with whom they might have constructed truly participatory democratic institutions entailing effective vertical accountability mechanisms.

In early 2016, ideological rivalries and differences, such as those over partnership with Ennahda and the pardoning and reintegration of business elites involved in the old regime, produced a split in Nidaa. This was followed by street demonstrations by dissatisfied citizens and a government crackdown reminiscent of the old regime.⁵⁸

Hence, the outcome of Tunisia's transition is still uncertain, despite major achievements and avoiding a democratic reversal as in Egypt. The government has only

changed hands once through peaceful elections.⁵⁹ Major challenges loom large in areas such as economic stability, public security, secular-Islamic distrust, religious extremism, and the spectre that authoritarian regime elements may control the political scene via compromises with Islamists and in the guise of elected governments. While democratic consolidation is possible, other scenarios such as the emergence of a semi-democratic system, which would feature multiparty politics as well as an oppressive and unaccountable state, and the return of the old regime are also conceivable.

In Turkey, Islamists' sense of exclusion was replaced with a new sense of strength and dominance. This new perception was best manifested when the then Prime Minister Erdoğan declared following the victorious 2011 election outcome that, ending its era of "apprenticeship", the AKP's next term would be its era of "mastership".⁶⁰ Thus began the second phase of Turkey's democratic transition. During this phase, Turkey's challenge was to ensure civilian government accountability by strengthening horizontal and vertical accountability in the new political context where elected governments were stronger and free from military-bureaucratic supervision.

Instead, the AKP grew increasingly Islamist and authoritarian.⁶¹ Increasingly, it oppressed the media, restricted freedoms, and grew intolerant of opposition. It staffed the judiciary with loyalists, weakened separation of powers, and worked to form a party state. Turkish democracy heavily suffered in terms of both horizontal and vertical accountability. The party itself became increasingly less pluralist and more dominated by charismatic Erdoğan.⁶² It turned increasingly nationalist and Islamist, bent on employing Turkey's authoritarian state apparatus in the service of national-Islamic social engineering.⁶³ Thereby, it seemed to build new alliances with nationalist state elites.

Hence, the country suffered a democratic reversal in 2015 when the AKP could be considered an emerging, authoritarian-hegemonic party, blurring the dividing lines between the party and state, willing to bluntly manipulate the basic fairness of elections – a hitherto major accomplishment of Turkish democracy – and singlehandedly run by President Erdoğan in violation of the constitution obliging him to be neutral.⁶⁴ Turkey may transition to (stable or unstable) competitive authoritarianism or resume democratization.⁶⁵

"The iron laws of oligarchy" and the AKP's growing self-confidence and emancipation from secularist constraints in a context of weakening vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms were some apparent reasons for this authoritarian transformation. The absence of effective civil society mediation, similar to the role the National Dialogue Quartet played in Tunisia, between the opposition and the government contributed to government oppressiveness during and after the pro-secular Gezi protests in 2013.⁶⁶ Erdogan and many AKP politicians interpreted these massive anti-government protests as an existential threat to their long-aspired new status as the speakers of the nation and as a western-international conspiracy rather than a home-grown reaction against their heavy-handed policies. In-fighting within the Islamist coalition, notably the fallout with the Gülen movement, which levelled major corruption allegations against the government, radicalized Erdogan supporters and allowed him to sideline his rivals in the party and to crack down on all opposition.⁶⁷

Ineffective opposition parties, which were now further enfeebled by the government's authoritarian policies, failed to overcome their disagreements over issues such as the Kurdish conflict in order to check and balance the AKP. This was best

manifested when they failed to elect a speaker of parliament and form a government after the AKP lost its majority in the June 2015 elections. Eventually, the AKP managed to restore its majority after Erdogan stalled the government formation process and when the elections were renewed under partially free but unfair electoral conditions in November.

Conclusions

While the emphasis of this article has been on domestic politics, the international context has been crucial for both cases in combination with the dynamics discussed here. Tunisia's transition was affected significantly by the events in Egypt. Tunisian secularists and Islamists tried to adopt more conciliatory policies vis-à-vis each other in order to prevent an Egyptian-style coup and the possible collapse of the Tunisian state via internal strife. Meanwhile, the stagnation of Turkey's EU relations due to failures on both sides and the regional developments in the aftermath of Arab uprisings contributed to Turkish Islamic actors becoming more authoritarian, nationalist, and Islamist. Many politicians saw the developments in Syria as an opportunity for Turkey to gain a position of leadership in the region. The AKP actively backed and organized the Syrian opposition dominated by the Muslim Brothers. Furthermore, Turkey was flooded with close to three million Syrian refugees, who included extremists. The AKP has been accused of showing tolerance, if not tacit support for radical Islamist groups such as Al Nusra and ISIS in Syria. Hence, preoccupation with state conquest became increasingly inspired by neo-Ottoman state-remaking with regional-Islamist (pro-ikhwan) aspirations.⁶⁸

In both Turkey and Tunisia, democratization requires the reformation and remaking of state institutions so as to create a more egalitarian and democratic relationship between these relatively "strong" states and their societies. As the main thesis and analysis in this article suggest, their preoccupation with state conquest undermined the ability of political Islamists in both countries to contribute to this goal. It induced them to focus on the secular identity of the elites who controlled these states rather than on the unaccountability of these elites and of the state institutions themselves.

For example, both Ennahda's and AKP's ideologies criticize the undemocratic nature of the state-dominated, laic models of secularism prevailing in their respective countries, and claim to uphold various versions of more democratic, or civilian models of secularism. The more the AKP amassed political power, however, the more it began to expand and strengthen rather than democratize Turkey's interventionist-laicist state institutions, preferring to utilize them for Islamic social-political engineering.⁶⁹

Against this background, the emergence of formal and credible institutional arrangements of power-sharing between religious and secular actors can create opportunities for successful democratization, by addressing one retrospective and one prospective driver of state conquest. First, it can help to reconcile a past grievance underlying political Islamists' attachment to state conquest, that is, as discussed, their exclusion from the processes of state-making during the foundational moments of these states. Second, if religious and secular actors can agree on effectively working vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms, "ownership of state" would cease to be such a desirable prize. Nor would it be such a fearful outcome if rival actors would dominate state institutions.

What does all this imply in regard to discussions of “post-Islamism?” In other words, to what extent can contemporary examples of Islamic politics appropriately be categorized as transcending “Islamist” politics, emphasizing rights rather than obligations, seeing people as citizens rather than subjects, and seeking to “establish an electoral democracy, a secular civil state, while promoting a pious society”?⁷⁰ Islamic actors’ relative emphasis on “Islamist” versus “post-Islamist” causes is changeable and contingent on international and domestic political-institutional context, political agency, and, often, the availability of political opportunities serving the cause of state conquest. The case of Turkey shows this, as the AKP began its rule with saliently “post-Islamist” politics and discourse while simultaneously pursuing state conquest, and in recent years chose to increasingly draw on authoritarian Islamism after the political-institutional context changed.

Notes

1. Casanova, “Civil Society and Religion”; Kalyvas, “Unsecular Politics and Religious Mobilization”; Haynes, “Religion and Democratizations”; Künkler and Leininger, “The Multi-Faceted Role of Religious Actors”; Somer, “Does it Take Democrats to Democratize”; Toft, Philpott, and Shah, *God’s Century*.
2. Among others, Hale and Özbudun, *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism*; Cavatorta and Merone, “Moderation through Exclusion?”
3. Mardin, “Turkish Islamic Exceptionalism”; Cavatorta and Merone, “Post-Islamism, Ideological Evolution,” 35–7. For a historical review, see Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*.
4. Kumbaracıbaşı, *Turkish Politics and the Rise of the AKP*; Kemahlioğlu, *Agents or Bosses?*; Van Hamme, Gana, and Ben Rebbah, “Social and Socio-Territorial Electoral Base.”
5. Bayat, “The Arab Spring.”
6. Among others, Çınar and Sayın, “Reproducing the Paradigm of Democracy”; Somer, “Moderation of Religious and Secular Politics”; Başkan, “Turkey’s Islamists”; Esen and Gümüşçü, “Rising Competitive Authoritarianism”; Somer, “Understanding Turkey’s Democratic Breakdown.”
7. Somer, “Moderation of Religious and Secular Politics”; Volpi and Stein, “Islamism and the State”; Boubekour, “Islamists, Secularists and Old Regime Elites.”
8. Donnell, “Delegative Democracy”; Tilly, *Democracy*. For a recent contribution see Slater, “Democratic Careening.”
9. Findley, *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, and Modernity*; Hale and Özbudun, *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism*; Anderson, *The State and Social Transformation*; Alexander, *Tunisia: Stability and Reform*; Chapters 1–2 in Aslan, *Nation-Building in Turkey and Morocco*; Heydemann, “Explaining the Arab Uprisings”; Somer, “Understanding Turkey’s Democratic Breakdown.” This conceptualization, of course, does not mean that state and society are ever entirely separable concepts.
10. Torelli, “The ‘AKP Model’ and Tunisia’s al-Nahda,” 66.
11. Waltz, “Islamist Appeal in Tunisia.”
12. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*; Fox, *A World Survey*; Somer, “Is Turkish Secularism Antireligious”; Waltz, “Islamist Appeal in Tunisia”; Mabrouk, “Tunisia.” Notably, both the old and 2014 Tunisian constitutions declare Islam the state’s religion.
13. Cavatorta and Merone, “Moderation through Exclusion,” 865; Somer, “Moderate Islam and Secularist Opposition.”
14. Volpi and Stein, “Islamism and the State,” 281; See also Donker, “Re-Emerging Islamism in Tunisia”; and Cavatorta and Merone, “Post-Islamism, Ideological Evolution.”
15. Piscatori, *Islam in a World of Nation-States*; Kurzman, *Modernist Islam*.
16. Donker, “Re-Emerging Islamism in Tunisia.”
17. Kaya, “Islamisation of Turkey”; Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity*.
18. Boubekour, “Islamists, Secularists and Old Regime Elites,” 107.
19. Belge, “Friends of the Court”; Hamid, *Temptations of Power*, 26.

20. Volpi, "Pseudo-Democracy"; Çınar and Sayın, "Reproducing the Paradigm of Democracy"; Somer, "Moderation of Religious and Secular Politics."
21. Somer, "Moderation of Religious and Secular Politics." Also see Schwedler, "Can Islamists Become Moderates?"
22. Tuğal, *Passive Revolution*. Also see Tezcür, *Muslim Reformers*.
23. Mabrouk, "Tunisia"; Wolf, "An Islamist 'Renaissance'?" Volpi and Stein, "Islamism and the State."
24. Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity*; Findley, *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, and Modernity*.
25. Bayat, "The Arab Spring."
26. Torelli, "The 'AKP Model' and Tunisia's al-Nahda," 66.
27. Among others, Cebeci, "De-Europeanization or Counter-Conduct."
28. Rodriguez et al., *Democratization Processes in Defective Democracies*.
29. For political democratization versus liberalization, see Ottaway and Choucair-Vizoso, *Beyond the Façade*.
30. Angrist, "Understanding the Success." "While Bourguiba constructed a state corporatist façade over a highly personalized management style, Ben Ali has constructed a liberal democratic façade over a centralized and insulated technocracy." Alexander, *Tunisia: Stability and Reform*, 7.
31. Boubekeur, "Islamists, Secularists and Old Regime Elites," 110.
32. Angrist, "Understanding the Success," 549.
33. Stepan, "Tunisia's Transition"; Angrist, "Understanding the Success."
34. Hajji, *The 18 October Coalition*, 7. Notably, other secularists sceptical of Islamists' intentions and opposed cooperation with them issued their own manifesto in 2006, which was called "Concerning a Drift" and signed by 109 prominent civil society organizations and public intellectuals.
35. Ibid., 1.
36. Stepan, "Tunisia's Transition," 96.
37. Angrist, "Understanding the Success," 549.
38. Belge, "Friends of the Court"; Somer, "Moderation of Religious and Secular Politics." These privileges were not exclusive and religious-conservative actors gained their own privileged access to some ministries and other state agencies under centre-right governments.
39. Somer, "Moderation of Religious and Secular Politics."
40. Somer, "Moderate Islam and Secularist Opposition."
41. Nasr, "The Rise of Muslim Democracy"; Kuru, "Secularism and State Policies toward Religion."
42. Bayat, "The Arab Spring."
43. Angrist, "Understanding the Success."
44. Bayat, "The Arab Spring."
45. Ibid.
46. Boubekeur, "Islamists, Secularists and Old Regime Elites," 111.
47. Ibid.
48. Somer, "Whither with Secularism."
49. Somer, "Moderate Islam and Secularist Opposition."
50. Somer, "Moderation of Religious and Secular Politics."
51. Belge, "Friends of the Court."
52. Jenkins, "Ergenekon, Sledgehammer"; Cizre and Walker, "Conceiving the New Turkey." In April, 2016, the highest appeal court overturned all the convictions for reasons including "fabricated evidence." "Turkey Ergenekon: Court Quashes 'Coup Plot' Convictions." *BBC News*, 21 April 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36099889>.
53. Arato, "Democratic Constitution-Making."
54. Gürsoy, "The Impact of EU-Driven Reforms."
55. Allani, "The Post-Revolution Tunisian Constituent Assembly."
56. Allegedly, radical militia groups linked to Ennahda attacked secular opposition groups. El-Issawi, "After the Arab Spring"; Hachemaoui, *Tunisia at a Crossroads*, 6.
57. Wolf, "An Islamist 'Renaissance'?" International Crisis Group, *Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge*, 36.
58. Williamson, "A Silver Lining."

59. In 2013, the Islamist-led “Troika” government resigned and was replaced with a technocratic interim government largely as a result of a negotiated settlement of a political crisis, not through elections.
60. Video of speech on AKP party website: <https://www.akparti.org.tr/site/video/8471/yarin-ustalik-donemi-basliyor-tuzla> (accessed 11 May 2015).
61. Somer, “Moderation of Religious and Secular Politics.”
62. Lancaster, “The Iron Law of Erdogan.”
63. Kaya, “Islamisation of Turkey”; Yörük, “Welfare Provision”; Somer, “Whither with Secularism.”
64. As of 2015, Freedom House considered Turkey “partly free” with downward trends and scores of four and three for civil and political liberties respectively, and the Turkish press “not free” with the same score as Pakistan and Malaysia. <https://freedomhouse.org/search/press%20freedom> (accessed 22 September 2015).
65. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*; Somer, “Moderation of Religious and Secular Politics”; Esen and Gümüşçü, “Rising Competitive Authoritarianism”; Somer, “Understanding Turkey’s Democratic Breakdown.”
66. Yörük and Yüksel, “Class and Politics.”
67. Somer, “Turkey’s Way Out.”
68. Onis, “Turkey and the Arab Spring”; Ozkan, “Turkey, Davutoglu”; Cebeci, “De-Europeanization or Counter-Conduct.”
69. Somer, “Whither with Secularism.” Ennahda’s 2016 declaration to separate politics from preaching is undoubtedly an important development. The argument here implies that such declarations may be reversed in the future depending on the political and institutional contexts, given the ideological flexibility of these actors and their prioritization of state-conquest. The idea of “takhassus” (specialization), on which the declaration was based, can be interpreted in various ways. Marks, “How Big were the Changes?”
70. Bayat, “The Arab Spring.”

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