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## **The Turkish “Model”: Secular Institutions or Moderate Islamists?**

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What do we learn from Turkey about building democracy in a Muslim society? When an unworthy movie mocking Prophet Mohammad provoked deadly protests in many Muslim nations, only peaceful protests occurred here. What makes Turkey different? Premier Erdoğan took credit for his moderate Islamist AKP. His party helped to calm many Islamists. It is also true that a major chapter in the relative success story of Turkish democracy and modernization was the moderation of Turkish political Islamism during the 1990s from an ideological and state-oriented brand into the AKP’s pragmatic and business-oriented brand. However, without telling the remaining chapters, this would be a misleading story to learn from. The Turkish case became a relative success because it managed to build relatively secular and relatively democratic and rule-based social and political institutions. And it failed whenever these institutions were flawed and were not improved upon through cooperation between religious and secular actors.

Thus, rather than Turkey succeeding because of moderate Islamists, moderate Islamists succeeded because of Turkey’s partially working secular and democratic institutions. Without realizing this, many overlook that Turkey has been eroding its comparative advantages. In recent years, the AKP has embarked upon profiting from the flaws of Turkey’s secular democracy instead of fixing them. Paradoxically, the democratic winds of the Arab Spring accelerate this trend.

Modern Turkey was founded during the 1920s and 1930s by top-down and radical secularization. The downside was that this highly complicated modern Turks’ ties to their historical-cultural legacy and generated resentful Islamist elites who were oppressed. The upside was that this process accomplished three crucial goals: constructing an overarching national identity, curtailing antipathy against westernization and de-linking socioeconomic modernization and the hurdles of reinterpreting Islamic orthodoxy, and generating relatively robust secular and impersonal institutions.

Nevertheless, all this could not have distinguished Turkey from authoritarian secular republics of the Arab world, had Turkey’s secular elites not moderated and allowed real multiparty elections after 1950. Additionally, Turkey got more inclusive and competitive economic institutions through liberalization after 1980, and more accountable ones through IMF-guided reforms after its 2000-2001 financial crises.

The AKP is a product of these accomplishments. Though secularist institutions severely sanctioned political Islamists, free and fair elections gave them a real chance to moderate and come to power. By contrast to the Arab world, westernization removed the stigma attached to secularism as a dirty, western value, which enabled the AKP to uphold a conservative version of secular democracy. Relatively liberal economic institutions gave the AKP the tools to run the economy and a supportive Muslim-conservative bourgeoisie.

But Turkey's secular-democratic institutions were flawed. Although secularists allowed rotation of government through real elections, they left the ultimate power in the hands of a secularist military and colossal state apparatus. While Turkey developed a strong national identity and relatively ethnicity-blind institutions, this meant discrimination and denial for ethnic-national minorities most notably the Kurds. Under the disguise of separating state and religion, supposedly secular institutions controlled religion, promoted Sunni Islam, discriminated against the Alevis, and violated both secular and religious freedoms. Governments retained tremendous powers to restrict economic freedoms and discriminate among business actors for political purposes.

Supportive democrats hoped the AKP to fix these flaws. The party did a lot. Most importantly, it tamed military praetorianism by standing firm against its aggressions. Last week, a civilian court unprecedentedly sentenced to twenty years three former top generals for planning a coup in 2003. In its first two terms, the AKP pursued a highly reformist agenda guided by EU criteria.

Recently, however, the AKP has taken a religious-conservative, nationalist and authoritarian turn. Rather than making the political system less personal and more accountable, Erdoğan centralized decisions in himself and wants a presidential system. Abandoning a "Kurdish opening," the government returned to military-based policies. Rather than reforming state-dominated secularism (*laiklik*) by making it more neutral vis-à-vis minority and secular beliefs, the government seems to use it to promote Sunni Islam. Political, religious, and opportunistic favoritism is rampant in government recruitments, promotions, and tenders.

Paradoxically, post-Arab Spring regional troubles exacerbate these trends. The policy of zero-problems with neighbors gave way to problems and tensions with Syria, Iran, Iraq and Israel. Foreign policy troubles compelled the government to move closer to Sunni political forces in the region, and made it less tolerant of criticism. The mainstream discourse is becoming increasingly religious, sectarian and anti-western. No violent rallies occurred against the movie "Innocent Muslims," but "experts" with academic titles popped up on TVs saying things like "westerners always need 'hateful others' to build their own identity, 'we easterners' are different, we don't need that and are tolerant of ethnic and religious others."

The AKP cannot be blamed for all of this. Turkey is still an electoral democracy and the AKP would be impelled to reform itself or voters could elect another government if there was a viable alternative. But the pro-secular Republican People's Party CHP has yet to

formulate feasible alternative policies for resolving problems like the Kurdish conflict, reforming secularism, running the economy and providing services.

Turkey can still remain a positive example. Turkey's comparative advantages were based in constructing partially working secular and democratic institutions. The present, multiparty process of making a new constitution can help to make these institutions truly secular and democratic. For this to happen, however, Turkey's elites should not repeat the mistakes of their previous institution-builders. Rather than being the product of one ideology or hegemonic actor, all stakeholders of democracy should have a say in their formation, including Turks and Kurds, men and women, haves and have-nots, and religious and secular.

All this means that the main lesson others can take from the Turkish experience is not how the AKP won elections or moderated its Islamist ideology and discourse. These can change. Nor is the lesson to ignore ethnicity and religion. The challenge is to try to build ethnically and religiously neutral, impersonal and inclusive democratic institutions through cooperation and compromise.

<http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/turkeys-model-of-moderate-islamism-can-be-misleading>