

Analysis

July 1, 2011

Summary: Paradoxically, secularization and Islamization go hand in hand in Turkey. The AKP that emerged from Turkey's Islamist movement is the agent of an ascending entrepreneurial class, which has prospered phenomenally in the course of the past eight years and benefited from patronage and rent distribution. Meanwhile, the losers of the global integration process were taken care of with a series of populist (and popular) measures. Is today's picture in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy a function solely of the AKP governments? Over the course of the last two centuries, Turkey made the historical choices to become a capitalist, secular, and democratic country with a Muslim population. The AKP must be seen and evaluated as a product of Turkish economic and political history, as must its foreign policy.

Democracy, Islam, and the AKP

by Soli Özel

Time was when Latin America was thought incapable of building functioning democracies or of achieving sustainable economic growth. This, many analysts suggested, was due to immutable cultural factors, including Catholicism. Today, most Latin American countries have functioning democracies and good growth rates; Brazil is a world economic giant with a healthy democracy.

Nonetheless, the culturalist interpretations that have been clearly disproved in many parts of the world remain very much en vogue when it comes to the Muslim world. Facile generalizations abound — as though life in Senegal and Indonesia, Afghanistan and Bosnia, Malaysia and Algeria reflected the same understanding of Islamic beliefs. The obvious problems of integration that many Muslims had in European countries were explained simply by an almost genetically defined cultural separateness. An absurd debate over Islam's compatibility with either capitalism or democracy spread around the world. As if any religion or its holy book *per se* could explain social, economic, and political beliefs, phenomena, and behavior.

When Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) won a resounding electoral victory and a third consecu-

tive term in power on June 12 (with half of the votes cast and a voter participation of 83 percent), comments from abroad focused heavily on culture and religion rather than discussing the Turkish case with the analytical tools available to us in social sciences. In such analyses, the primary task was not to decipher the success of the AKP or point to the traps of a single party dominant political system and its proclivity for authoritarian rule. Instead they highlighted the "Muslimness" of democracy (never does anyone write about the Christianness or Jewishness of democracy) and reiterated their reservations that stemmed from the Turks' religion.

In his magisterial work *Islam and Capitalism* (1966), the great French historian Maxime Rodinson demonstrated that "against the stereotype of Islamic hostility to modern capitalism... Muslims had never had any trouble in making money" (After all, the Prophet was a successful merchant.) Indeed, it was not Islam that resisted capitalist penetration, but the Islamists — much like the 19th-century Luddites in England who tried to stop the modernization of the textile industry by destroying mechanical looms.



Analysis

As for the AK Party, Cihan Tuğal, the author of *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism* (2009), argues that the AKP's historical mission has been to make capitalism acceptable to broader segments of the Turkish population and to break Islamist resistance to capitalist integration. Inspired by the Italian Marxist political philosopher Antonio Gramsci, Tuğal argued that religion and religious networking have helped to integrate previously excluded groups into the Turkish economy, and from there into global markets. A similar link between religious mobilization and economic integration, transforming and modernizing social relations, can be seen in the experience of the evangelical movement in the American South.

The profound changes wrought on Turkey by this process of economic and social integration are particularly visible in the cities. Indeed, as foreign commentators are quick to point out, there are more women wearing headscarves in Turkish cities; but the fact that they move in the cities with other urbanites signals how much their traditional role has changed. Increasingly, class distinctions among headscarf-wearing women have become visible in their demeanor, their apparel, and their lifestyles. In an economy that has grown by an average of 5.5 percent in the past eight years, consumerism has won over frugal Islamic living for the new middle classes.

Paradoxically, secularization and Islamization go hand in hand in Turkey. In gender relations, secularization is moving ahead at full speed. On other aspects of social life, an increasingly pervasive conservatism is making itself felt. On a potentially symbolic issue such as public consumption of alcohol, such conservatism manifests itself strongly through political pressure and proliferating constraints, but not outright banning of alcohol. In the meantime, Turkey's recently revitalized wine industry is raising its international profile.

The AKP that emerged from Turkey's Islamist movement is the agent of an ascending entrepreneurial class, which has prospered phenomenally in the course of the past eight years and benefited from patronage and rent distribution. The new "peripheral" capitalists thereby started to threaten, if not yet to displace, the old economic establishment. The AKP unabashedly used the state power that it now

controlled to relentlessly offer advantages to such groups and individuals close to the party.

Meanwhile, the losers of the global integration process were taken care of with a series of populist (and popular) measures. Near-universal health services, the free distribution of basic goods such as flour, coal, and sugar, free schoolbooks for children, and affordable housing: all these account for the continuing popularity of the AK Party among the less prosperous segments of Turkish society, and in fact go a long way in explaining its resounding victory on June 12. Undoubtedly an 11 percent growth rate for the arguably overheated Turkish economy in the first quarter of the year makes consumers/citizens happy and keeps hopes for a more prosperous future alive. Last but not least, the AKP's victory is also a clear tribute to the flawless work of a well-organized, disciplined, highly motivated party machine that is sharply concentrated in its goals.

In short, the AKP is a typical populist party, with the innate tendency to move in an authoritarian direction. It managed to abide by the rules of the global economic and financial system all the while mobilizing resources domestically to provide a safety net and some advancement to the less fortunate citizenry. How long this act can go on remains to be seen, and this is undoubtedly the Achilles heel of the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan governments' strategy.

The AKP managed to abide by the rules of the global economic and financial system all the while mobilizing resources domestically to provide a safety net and some advancement to the less fortunate citizenry. How long this act can go on remains to be seen.



Analysis

It is now evident that in the new *weltenschaung* that the AKP wishes to establish as the frame of reference for the Turkish polity, foreign policy and the way it is articulated play an important role as well.

In this new dispensation, Turkey's foreign policy is driven above all by the need of its new entrepreneurial classes for new markets — in the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere in the world. During the past decade, this dynamism, coupled with the governments' energetic pursuit of a zone of interest and the power vacuums left by the United States and the EU in the neighborhood, have all worked together to raise Turkey's foreign policy profile. (The carefully cultivated image of Turkey as a successfully independent actor in the Middle East is of course very helpful in the context of domestic politics as well.) A burst of modernization and creativity in Turkish arts, entertainment, and lifestyle has greatly boosted the country's soft power, and turned it into a source of inspiration for the secular middle classes as much as for Islamic groupings in the neighborhood, which covet the AK Party's stature and success.

Turkey's foreign policy is driven above all by the need of its new entrepreneurial classes for new markets — in the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere in the world.

Throughout this period, Turkey worked with the existing regimes and made its political and diplomatic investments in them. But at the same time, by energetically taking up the Palestinian cause, defying the United States on the issue of Iran, and raising its voice on global issues, it also tantalized the Arab publics that just have had enough of the authoritarianism, corruption, and servility of their governments.

The Arab revolts changed this picture dramatically. The regimes have either been overthrown or their brutality — particularly in Syria, where Turkey had invested heavily

in political and economic terms — made it impossible to support them. Turkey's much talked-about “zero problem with neighbors” principle was jeopardized. In Egypt fast and early and in Libya gradually, reluctantly, but finally clearly, Turkey took the side of the rebels.

At the beginning of the Arab revolts, the question of Turkey providing a model was much discussed. Later on, when the ineffectiveness of Turkish foreign policy, just like everybody else's, had become evident in places like Syria or Libya, some commentators argued that Turkey missed its moment. In my view, neither argument is convincing.

Indeed as the electoral campaign finally ended, Ankara has now begun to clearly distance itself from the Syrian regime. It has emphasized the need to deal with humanitarian concerns, and is pressuring Bashar al-Assad himself to drop his criminal kin. This suggests the beginnings of a fundamental change, from status-quo-oriented pragmatism to a more principle- and value-oriented stance in Turkish foreign policy. In the new parlance, this is called the “policy of conscience.”

There remains one question that deserves scrutiny. Is today's picture in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy a function solely of the AKP governments? I would argue that without shortchanging the AKP governments' contributions and their management of a particularly challenging environment in the past decade, there are continuities that reflect Turkey's historical and structural achievements.

What made Turkey attractive was not just the conjecture of the past ten years that had now come to an end. Much more important were the country's attributes. Over the course of the last two centuries, Turkey made the historical choices to become a capitalist, secular, and democratic country with a Muslim population and a member of the Atlantic Alliance. It still, even if half-heartedly, pursues EU membership. These will not go away.

In this perspective, the AKP must be seen and evaluated as a product of Turkish economic and political history. Its economic and political successes, including its record of demilitarizing Turkish polity and its early moves towards democratization, are a function of AKP's activism but they also built on generations of secular democrats' struggles.



Most people in the neighborhood envy the social atmosphere and lifestyle of Turkey's cosmopolitan cities. Islamists of the region envy the democratic success of AKP in power. But what made that success possible was the fact that Turkey's Islamists have been an integral part of the Turkish political system since the late 1960s. As a result, they always remained within the legitimate bounds of Turkey's tutelary democracy and did not resort to violence like other Islamist movements.

What made that democratic success possible was the fact that Turkey's Islamists have been an integral part of the Turkish political system since the late 1960s.

In the wake of its resounding victory, the AKP has important choices to make. In foreign policy, the gradual but certain distancing from Iran and the subtle allowance for opening up channels with Israel to find ways for reconciliation a year after the fatal Israeli assault on a civilian ship that claimed nine Turks' lives give an indication about its future orientation. The AKP and the country in general will still claim to be a central actor in the region, as was made crystal clear by Erdoğan's victory speech that saluted the peoples of all surrounding region from Sarajevo, to Baku to Gaza. Turkey will not want to play second fiddle to anyone and in all likelihood, both its rhetoric and behavior will be favoring democracy, human rights, and sovereignty of the people.

Such a foreign policy track and the accompanying pro-democracy rhetoric will also put the AKP under the spotlight. How it will handle the hitherto intractable Kurdish problem, when assertive, self-confident, and overtly nationalistic Kurds are in the Parliament will be a great test of its democratic credentials and intentions. Even more impor-

tantly, will the AK Party use its near-monopoly on power to continue down the path of populist/electoral authoritarianism — or will it seek to build a genuine democracy with full freedom of expression, press and association? The new constitution that the AK Party is now beginning to draft, and how participatory the drafting of that constitution will be, will soon provide the answer to this question.

About the Author

Soli Özel teaches at Istanbul Kadir Has University. He is a columnist for the national daily *Haberturk* and is senior advisor to the chairman of the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association. Additionally, he is the editor of TUSIAD's magazine *Private View*.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) is a non-partisan American public policy and grantmaking institution dedicated to promoting better understanding and cooperation between North America and Europe on transatlantic and global issues. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has seven offices in Europe: Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

About the *On Turkey* Series

GMF's *On Turkey* is an ongoing series of analysis briefs about Turkey's current political situation and its future. GMF provides regular analysis briefs by leading Turkish, European, and American writers and intellectuals, with a focus on dispatches from on-the-ground Turkish observers. To access the latest briefs, please visit our web site at www.gmfus.org/turkey or subscribe to our mailing list at <http://database.gmfus.org/reaction>.