

Turkey's Democracy, Europe's Imperative Nora Fisher Onar (2011)

The result of Turkey's election creates a vital need to put the country's relationship with the European Union at the centre of both partners' concerns. What is at stake is the historic mission of reconciling secularism, democracy and Islam, says Nora Fisher Onar.

The world in all its complexity is encapsulated in a grain of sand, suggested William Blake. He could have been talking about Turkey. At least, that is how it feels in the aftermath of the national elections on 12 June 2011. For the event has emphasised how Turkey both (universally) exemplifies the triangular relationship between secularism, democracy, and Islam yet (uniquely) subverts expectations about it.

It has long been assumed that a country can enjoy two of the three, but never all three combined. The presumed tradeoff is as follows. Secularism, often defined (though rarely practiced) as state equidistance from all forms of religiosity, is said to underpin democracy. This way, nobody can impose their views on others. Islam, however, is perceived as difficult to privatise, hence problematic for secularism. It is also seen as illiberal, hence problematic for democracy. As such, in a predominantly Muslim society, one can have electoral democracy, but, the logic goes, there must be mechanisms to discipline public expressions of Islamic practice. There is, in short, a perceived need to downgrade democracy to ensure secularism in Muslim contexts; otherwise, Muslim democracy will morph into Muslim rule.

This view long underpinned western support for authoritarian yet secular regimes in the middle east. But the arrival on the scene of the Justice & Development Party (AKP) and its pursuit of democratising reform oriented towards European Union accession during its first term in government in Turkey (2002-07) spurred many to question whether the tradeoff was not a figment of the orientalist imagination in which western progressiveness is made possible by representations of a regressive east.

Indeed, the culturalist backlash in Europe as Turkey advanced towards membership suggested that the problem is not Islam at all. Rather, it may be the inability of many Europeans to recognise that their own secular and democratic arrangements may be laden with (post-)Christian bias towards Turkey and some

15 million Muslim Europeans. That bias was heightened in the fallout of the attacks of 9/11, 11/3 (Madrid), and 7/7 (London), and exacerbated by the 2008-09 economic crisis; the overall effect was to empower those who insist that Islamophobia / xenophobia are legitimate - indeed democratic - expressions of what Europe *is*.

A historic turn

The AKP, blocked in Europe, explored other ways to consolidate its domestic and international position. It launched its second term (2007-11) with “Ottomanism” - an invocation of continuity and legacies from the Ottoman period for contemporary traction. At home, this filled the void left by receding Kemalist and EU referents. Abroad, it offered a convenient model for coordinating and communicating policy. The idea was that historical affinities and geographical contiguities could enhance diplomatic and economic relations. The upshot would be regional interdependence empowering to all.

In effect, Ottomanism was a bid to ground the democratic peace in “authentic” idiom and practices. This too challenged the presumed incommensurability of secularism, democracy, and Islam. For example, Turkish mediation facilitated the establishment of a Bosnian delegation in Belgrade, speaking of the possibility of mutual recognition rather than ethno-religious hostility in post-Ottoman spaces. Friends of Turkey in Europe lauded the framework for tapping the country’s true potential, and pointed to lessons for an EU gripped by doubts about its own peace project.

In the middle east, however, the AKP belief that Turkey could facilitate a regional settlement by engaging all parties - including those deemed pariah by the west - proved naïve. When a Turkey-brokered deal between Syria and Israel collapsed with Israel’s invasion of Gaza, Turkey took sides. As relations deteriorated, AKP figures but, above all, civil society with links to the party, used unreconstructed Islamist rhetoric to condemn Israel in vivid terms. This scored populist but also pyrrhic points in Turkey and the “Arab street”. For it spurred observers to ask whether the AKP had abandoned the west and, as such, the project of transcending west/east binaries.

Others have asked whether Turkey is not in fact “turning” towards Russia, given prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s autocratic outbursts and desire for a

presidential system which would concentrate power in his hands. Press freedoms are being violated, the internet censored. Heckling invites disproportionate responses, and police aggression has resulted in miscarriage and death. The Ergenekon trial, which initially targeted agents of the “deep state”, has, some charge, become an instrument to discipline perceived opponents. Still others suggest that the AKP, having neutralised the military, now commands its own reserve domain within the civilian security apparatus.

To be fair, the situation is hardly comparable to the 1990s when Turkey was a human-rights quagmire. Nevertheless, the gains of the 2000s are being reversed. The danger is that the AKP will squander its hard-won opportunity to enact a pluralistic democratic order in a Muslim-majority society.

A joint enterprise

The election offered only enigmatic indicators of what the future holds. An encouraging sign is that moderates from each camp in Turkey’s cleavage-ridden polity demand the new, post-election constitution be based on liberal-democratic principles. Also, in the face of AKP hegemony, former statist parties with illiberal reflexes recognise the value - or plain old utility - of democratic procedures. For example, the sex-video scandal that dogged the ultranationalist campaign spurred supporters to embrace the slogan “We are all MHP”; the party took fifty-three seats.

For its part, the CHP, till recently bastion of hardline Kemalists, sought to rebrand as a bona fide social-democratic party. Although old-guard candidates were also fielded, its dramatic shift on democratisation raised its vote-share by 5% to 135 seats. Kurdish and socialist independents fared especially well with thirty-six MPs.

At the end of the day, the AKP won 325 seats on the basis of its economic and public service record. This is not enough for a plebiscite on a presidential system or unilateral constitutional reform. If this means tough bargains, it may make for a more transparent process, and the party is already seeking to engage the new, reform-minded CHP.

After every election, the AKP has embraced a novel frame for its domestic and international agenda. If Erdoğan’s acceptance speech is anything to go by, this

round will entail a mélange of the democratising, Ottomanist, and (post-)Islamist stories with an eye to capturing the imagination of the middle east. Proclaiming a commitment to law, peace, justice, freedom, and democracy in the region, he declared, “Today, it is the oppressed everywhere who have won; Sarajevo as much as Istanbul, Beirut as much as Izmir, Damascus as much as Ankara, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza as much as Diyarbakir. Today, the middle east, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and Europe have won as much as Turkey.”

That “Europe” appears in the narrative at all signals what may be a last opportunity to reach out to a Turkey where it has lost all leverage. The time could not be more ripe as, in the aftermath of the Arab revolutions, Turkey’s attempt to reconcile secularism, democracy, and Islam is of vital importance to Europe’s own security and future. It is imperative that Europe’s leaders closely monitor Turkey’s constitutional debates and strongly incentivise an inclusive settlement. In this way, they may ensure that the (post-)Islamist story, coupled with a slide towards authoritarianism, does not trump the other dimensions of the party’s repertoire, with serious implications for the middle east.

Reviving cooperation with the EU is also essential to Turkey's bid to become a regional game-maker. Its power of attraction, after all, emanates from the ability to bridge "west" and "east" and prove that liberal democracy is possible in a Muslim-majority setting. If it fails on these fronts, Erdoğan’s citation of more Palestinian than Turkish cities in his victory speech will prove just one more instance of empty populism in a region Cairo and Tehran know more intimately than Ankara. Partnering with Europe also could ensure that ties with an Israel that cannot just be ignored remain on secure enough footing to permit dialogue when the time is ripe. Turkey and the EU can bring their respective know-how and resources to help rebuild the region, addressing common challenges like the influx of refugees from Syria and Libya. This will enable them to learn together and from one another about a new neighbourhood where, as Gilles Kepel has observed, Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood are searching for models of engagement in normal politics. An EU-Turkey partnership in the region is also a way to bracket the thorny question of Turkish membership whilst ensuring concerted cooperation.

In short, a joint approach will ensure bridges have not been burned if Turkey’s AKP proves able to rise to its world-historic challenge of reconciling secularism, democracy, and Islam. In so doing, it may offer inspiration to the middle east,

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Page 4 of 5

but also a Europe in the throes of confronting its own, self-defeating anxiety about Muslim alterity.

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Page 5 of 5