

# Moderate Islam and Secularist Opposition in Turkey: implications for the world, Muslims and secular democracy

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ABSTRACT

does all this mean for the world in regard to Muslims' relations with modernity and secular democracy? At first, the answers to these questions seem to depend on the nature of the AKP itself: whether it is a secretly Islamist, moderate Islamist, or Islamic – conservative democratic party, and how sincere its commitments are to secular democracy. Alternatively one may ask to what extent Islamic principles, or, for that matter, religious principles, can be compatible with secular democracy in the long run, a critical question throughout the world.

A more complete analysis reveals that the party's legacy will depend as much on the party's own nature and decisions as it will on the nature and decisions of the secularist political actors. There are no fixed answers. The AKP as a party and ideology, and moderate Islamism in general, are dynamic. Religious politics is a product of both its own roots and its domestic and international political and economic milieu. One can foresee different AKPs, and thus different prospects for Turkish secularism, depending on various factors such as Turkey's political system, economic development, external support, and social divisions over values. The key intervening variable is democratic consolidation.

The establishment and, so far, performance of the AKP forms a major example of the 'moderation' of political Islam through the embrace of democracy, modernity and liberal global economy, as opposed to 'radical' Islamism, which pursues an Islamic state, as in Iran or Saudi Arabia.<sup>1</sup> The party defines itself as conservative democratic, and its record in government since 2002 'has been markedly moderate'.<sup>2</sup> It has achieved path-breaking reforms in democratisation, and continuous economic stability and growth. It secured the start of Turkey's EU accession talks in 2005. It became the first governing party since 1960 to have the courage to stand up to the military's interference in politics by publicly denouncing the military's criticism of the government.<sup>3</sup>

The party's moderation cannot be explained away as an unintended and unreliable product of opportunistic steps in response to 'lucky coincidences'.<sup>4</sup> The party was able to use its opportunities because a young and pragmatic generation of Turkish Islamists critical of the old guard decided to found the AKP with a deliberately chosen pro-democracy programme and secular outlook. They did so by learning from past mistakes and with an eye to appealing to broader segments of the electorate.<sup>5</sup>

Yet significant portions of Turkish society and the secularist military and judiciary continue to suspect the AKP of anti-secularism, and, for that matter, anti-democratic tendencies. Secularist rallies in spring 2007 drew millions of people. The rallies are indicative of a major socio-political rift in this pivotal emerging market and democracy. How this rift is managed will determine whether Turkish democracy will finally become a full rather than a guided democracy, where democracy includes not only free elections but also the freedom of elected governments to pursue policies disapproved of by the military on issues such as secularism and the Kurdish question. It will also determine the evolution of Turkish secularism and political Islam.

### Which AKP and which moderation?

The AKP represents Turkey's new modernisers with Islamist and Islamic-conservative roots, who both benefited from secular modernisation and deeply resented its perceived anti-religious practices.<sup>6</sup> One way to predict its future evolution and impact on Turkish democracy could be via a crude application of what may be called the 'democratic moderation thesis'.<sup>7</sup> According to this thesis, the more the AKP participates in democracy, the more it will 'moderate' and contribute to democratisation and modernisation. The more it is excluded, the less it will moderate, jeopardising further democratisation and modernisation, and relations with the Western world.

As I will elaborate in the sections ahead, we need a more multifaceted understanding of Turkish politics and of moderate Islamism to make a more accurate prediction. The moderation of Turkish Islam in the example of the AKP did not result from simple, unrestrained participation in democracy, but from a complex mixture of incentives to participate, and disincentives to accentuate Islam, in a guided democracy.

In fact, roughly speaking, three different scenarios can produce three different AKPs and thus three different moderate Islamisms. A major determinant of these scenarios will be the AKP's secularist rivals.

The first scenario could occur if the AKP is rivaled by weak and fragmented secularist political parties. In this case the party would be emboldened to launch further legal-institutional reforms which may initially strengthen democracy, for example by reducing the military's clout. One could also argue that the weakness of the parties in the center-right and center-left might encourage the party to adopt more moderate policies to fill the gap. Simultaneously, however, if unrivalled, the party might be unable to resist promoting a deeper and faster Islamisation, not necessarily of government, but of society in education and social regulation. Moralists within the party may gain clout at the expense of pragmatists. Such social Islamisation would eventually be self-destructive for the AKP. It would jeopardise modernisation via an eventual deterioration of the relations with the Western world, especially with the EU, which could not embrace an increasingly Islamic Turkey in the face of rising Islamophobia in Europe. This scenario would also jeopardise democracy as a result of the interventions of the military, which cannot accept the rapid erosion of secular modernism envisioned by Atatürk. Democratisation would also be undermined if it is the fear of military intervention that dissuades the party from accentuating Islamisation.

The second scenario could occur if the AKP is balanced by strong secularist political parties, but those which hold secular-nationalism above democratisation. In this case, the AKP might capitalise on religious nationalism in order to rival secular nationalism. N-389.3(which2(er49,t)-3(to)-387.4(rival)-387.1(seks

Turkish nationalism itself, the rise of Kurdish nationalism in the Middle East, and the possibility of a Kurdish state in neighboring Iraq are fomenting Kurdish nationalism. Second, the Turkish military is encouraging Turkish nationalism as an antidote to both Kurdish separatism and Islamism. Third, Turkish nationalism is fuelled by the negative attitudes in some European countries toward Turkey's EU membership prospects, attitudes which are widely publicised in Turkey. In this environment the AKP may find it necessary to compete with secular-nationalist rivals by promoting Turkish nationalism with Islamic – conservative (Sunni Muslim) overtones.

In this case Turkey and the world would face a hard choice between two authoritarian forces: one secular-nationalist and the other Islamic – conservative nationalist. Neither force would be able to deepen democratic modernisation because competitive nationalist agendas would produce inward-looking economic policies and would exacerbate the Kurdish conflict by deepening the resentments of Turkish Kurds. Sunni Muslim nationalism would also alienate the Alevi Muslim population. Because of their weak democratic credentials, both forces would also face problems in deepening relations with the EU and the USA. Relations with the USA might also be undermined more directly because Turkey may venture to invade northern Iraq, despite US disapproval. All in all, Turkey would remain a flawed democracy and a failed economic miracle at best, and a case of democratic reversal and a semi-developed economy at worst.

The third and most promising scenario could occur if the AKP is checked and balanced by strong secularist political parties that manage to translate secularist and nationalist concerns into political programmes combining modernisation with further democratisation. Thus, henceforth, by strong secularist parties, I will be referring to voter support as well as ability to produce well thought-out social and economic programmes, minimise corruption within party ranks, and to build long-term links with constituencies. In this case pragmatists within the AKP would remain in control in order to appeal to mainstream voters. Both Turks and the world would have a healthy choice between two projects of democratic modernisation in Turkey, one Islamic – conservative but largely secular, and one secularist. Secularist voters would no longer look to the military as a guarantor of secularism because the AKP's project of moderate Islamisation would be checked by democratic secularist forces. Islamic conservatives would not need to capitalise on religious nationalism or Islamic radicalism because they would have a fair chance of coming to power through democratic processes and implementing some of their agenda. This scenario would also have a good chance of sustaining rapid economic development and deepening relations with the EU and the USA.

To accurately gauge the likelihood of each scenario and the consequences for 'secularism', we need a closer look at the secularist grievances and the theoretical links between secularism and democracy.

## The nature of the secularist mobilization: implications for Turkey and the world

Many of the speakers at and organisers of the secularist rallies appeared to advocate extreme nationalist or secularist views which find weak support among the Turkish electorate. Given the moderate record of the AKP, what motivated the ordinary participants at the rallies? This mass mobilisation of secularism is a new phenomenon in a society where Islam is a major part of the culture. In many ways it was hard to describe the participants, to understand their motivations and to assess the implications of their actions.<sup>8</sup>

The rallies were triggered by the AKP's nomination of the then Foreign

and the new religious – conservative middle class. The former is sceptical of Islamism of all sorts and the latter is drawn to a moderate and pro-modern sort of Islamism.

Through religious services and education the Turkish state attempts to influence social norms and culture by offering a version of Islam that is apolitical, rationalist and does not seek to regulate all spheres of life. In effect the state itself promotes a type of moderate Islam, in the production of which it tries to maintain a partial monopoly position. For those who are comfortable with this type of religion, the main threat is seen as another form of moderate Islam, not radical Islam. Thus community-based moderate Islam which comprises Islamic brotherhoods and other faith-based networks promoting their own versions of pro-modern Islam, a major constituency for the AKP, competes with the state-sponsored religion while also co-operating with it where necessary for survival and self-advancement.

Secularists understand that radical Islamism has little potential to rule in Turkey. Atatürk's reforms transformed society deeply, secularism

Thus the fact that the AKP has not changed ‘a single law that directly challenged the secular constitution’ is little comfort to the party’s opponents.<sup>22</sup> The new breed of moderate Islamic parties in the world has fewer ideological and state-centred, and more cultural and society-centred goals.<sup>23</sup> Arguably Islamism could not produce projects envisioning Islamic states and political spheres with indigenously Islamic rules and goals.<sup>24</sup> Thus its focus might have shifted to creating Islamic social spheres.

The programme and practice of the AKP indicate that its priorities lie in strengthening democracy and Islamic communities, and in promoting a more Islamic – conservative social and political mainstream. While doing this, the AKP encourages the development of Islamic lifestyles, values, and teachings



However, with the AKP, ▼ generates more reaction because of suspicions of gradual Islamisation. The government missed several opportunities to dispel these doubts by displaying its commitment to meritocracy in appointments such as the Governor of the Central Bank.<sup>27</sup>

Second, nowhere do ▼ and other administrative practices draw more opposition than in education. Again, there is little hard evidence for this, except that about 800 civil servants were transferred from the Directorate of Religious Affairs to the Ministry of Education.<sup>28</sup> In universities the party encouraged the appointment of rectors who are critical of secularist restrictions and tried to facilitate the admission of graduates of ▼ schools to universities.<sup>29</sup> Complaints regarding primary and secondary schools include the gradual Islamisation of textbooks, for example by gradually replacing the theory of evolution with versions of creationism.



Rather than secularism consolidating democracy, one may argue that successful democratisation consolidates secularism. There are many secular states that are not democracies. But all consolidated democracies have some

are created by the political system as a whole, ie its laws and institutions, customs and norms, political parties, and voters. For twin tolerations, these checks and balances should also be flexible enough to keep religious actors within the democratic game.

By comparison the AKP and its constituency now display a stronger rhetorical commitment to democracy. Western-style democracy, Turkey's EU prospects and open economy provide freedoms that aid the pursuit of more religious freedoms and a revised secularism. However, whenever the EU integration seemed to work to protect secularist interests or to undermine an Islamic agenda, the AKP turned critical of the EU processes. This happened, for example, when the European Court of Human Rights turned down a Turkish woman's application against the headscarf ban, and when the EU pressured the AKP to withdraw its proposal to criminalise adultery.<sup>37</sup> The strength of the AKP's commitment to democracy is as yet insufficiently clear when it requires the upholding of the freedoms of secularists and of disadvantaged groups such as ethnic Kurds, women, gays, or the Alevi minority who are demanding the same privileges as the Sunni Muslims. Importantly, it is also unclear what the party's reformed secularism would look like.

Such examples do not necessarily imply that the AKP's Western outlook and democratic commitments are insincere. The AKP's ideology should be seen as an ongoing project. The party's constituency includes Islamic-conservative, and, partially, secular-liberal business groups and middle classes, who stand to gain from economic integration with the world, which is made possible by a democratic system.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, a large literature on the ideological moderation of religious parties suggests that ideological moderation follows political moderation.<sup>39</sup> If Turkey's democratisation can be sustained, the AKP's moderation can also be sustained.

The path to sustained moderation is still a difficult process, however. Democratic consolidation will require continuing economic development and external support, and major ideological adaptation, from both secularists and Islamists, to be achieved and become sustainable. In particular, the military, which continues to enjoy high public prestige, will have to shed its long tradition of interfering in politics.<sup>40</sup> While a coup is unlikely, the military now seems to prefer 'softer' methods to influence politics, such as announcements criticising the government and the involvement of the retired military officers in civil society organisations and the media. A military conflict with Iraqi Kurds may increase the military's weight in politics.<sup>41</sup> The rise of pan-Kurdish nationalism in the region poses a great threat to Turkish democracy.

A solid EU commitment to Turkey's EU prospects would greatly benefit democratic consolidation. Simultaneously, democratic consolidation itself would increase the Europeans' support of Turkey's membership, while reducing the public's support of the military's political role.

name. For democratic consolidation actors should be able to make 'credible commitments' to each other regarding the rules of democracy and the boundaries between religion and state.<sup>42</sup>

controversy—say the legal definition of secularism or education policies—the AKP simply denies or withdraws its actions. The point here is not a normative one. The previous Islamist party in government, the Welfare Party, was forced to resign in 1997 as a result of a vicious media campaign and Islamist ‘witch hunt’ with the active involvement of the military. Against this background, any policy position the AKP publicly justifies on

from the centre-right and centre-left parties, toward the religious and nationalist parties on the right which were seen as less corrupt.<sup>50</sup>

Religious parties had strong organisations with dedicated grassroots cadres, which helped them to increase their electoral support. In addition, the AKP established a modern organisation credited with establishing strong ties of communication with the voters. Initially the AKP also managed to create a more egalitarian intra-party democracy than any other Turkish party, although it somewhat retreated to authoritarianism after coming to power.<sup>51</sup> The AKP may also be suffering from 'power malaise', which may explain some allegations of corruption against the party members and why it insisted on electing its own candidate for president rather than seeking a compromise with the opposition.

By comparison, the AKP's rivals suffer from all of the mentioned weaknesses and from fragmentation of similar parties. It is not clear whether attempts to merge the main opposition party CHP (Republican People's Party) with the DSP (Democratic Left Party), and two centre-right parties, DYP (True Path Party) and ANAP (Motherland Party) will survive personal conflicts and produce stable parties.

Fragmentation and weakness generate a political style which rewards confrontation rather than compromise, and power politics rather than policy creation. In this political party culture 'leaders are seen as heroes defending their parties against adversaries and the primary preoccupation is with "politics" rather than policy'.<sup>52</sup> The way to rise in politics is through loyalty to one's leader and by avoiding policy debates.

Yet the goal of preventing Islamisation within democracy, which secularist parties claim to pursue, requires that these parties produce effective policies and solutions in areas from economics to foreign policy, which would enable them to repeatedly win elections. It also requires that secularist parties threaten to attract some of the AKP's more moderate constituency by offering democratic solutions to questions such as the headscarf controversy, and a conciliatory rhetoric that would embrace rather than alienate pious voters. If they succeed, they can effectively balance the AKP, helping the latter to maintain its moderation. If they fail, 'radical secularism' may reverse Islamist moderation and widen the secularist-Islamist cleavage in Turkish society they so fear.<sup>53</sup>

Absent 'strong' and democratic secularist political parties, secularist mobilisation may fall prey to extreme nationalism and authoritarian tendencies that would endanger democratic consolidation.

programmes. These need to explain what secularists propose in terms of political reforms and socio-economic policies, and to address a number of essential trade-offs that secularists face. Is secularism more important than democracy? How would secularist policies protect secularism without polarising society? How would they protect secularism while at the same time advancing democratisation, economic development and EU relations?

### Prospects for democratic consolidation

The challenge for Turkey is to ensure that its ideological differences—especially in education, public recruitment and social life—are sorted out democratically, not by rallies on the streets or by resorting to authoritarian forces.<sup>54</sup>

A major factor increasing the prospects for democratic consolidation is economic development. In 2006 per capita income reached \$8600, which is one-and-a-half times the \$6000 threshold beyond which democratic reversals are considered to be highly unlikely.<sup>55</sup> Given what they have to lose, the bourgeoisie and the middle classes are unlikely to favour a democratic reversal. Nevertheless, a future economic crisis would challenge both the AKP's unity as a party and democratic consolidation.

In the long run democratic consolidation is protected by the EU relations?bour8al(bui.7678



## Notes

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- 44 For the importance of philosophical questions such as these, see A Filali-Ansary, 'Muslims and democracy'; and NH Ayubi 'Islam and Democracy', in D Potter, D Goldblatt, M Kilch & P Lewis (eds) *Islam and Democracy*, Cambridge: The Polity Press, 1997, pp 345 – 366.
- 45 Among others, H Smith, 'Fury at Turkish ban on bikini ads', *The Guardian*, 22 May 2007.
- 46 Among others, see S Sayarı & Y Esmer (eds), *Democracy in Turkey*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002.
- 47 However, since 1961 voter preferences have roughly been stable between 'left' and 'right' parties, with some shift to the right during the 1990s. For a recent contribution, see Y Hazama, 'The 1990s and the rise of the right in Turkey', Chiba: Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization, 2007. Importantly, Hazama argues that, since the 1990s, volatility has mainly been caused by 'retrospective voting', whereby voters punish incumbent governments for bad governance rather than voting for values or along identity cleavages.
- 48 Sayarı & Esmer, *Democracy in Turkey*, p 107.
- 49 Lowry, 'Betwixt and between', p 24.
- 50 See also Sayarı, 'The changing party system'.
- 51 Among others, S Tepe, 'A pro-Islamic party? Promises and limits of Turkey's Justice and Development Party', in Yavuz, *The Islamic Challenge in Turkey*, pp 107 – 135.
- 52 M Heper, 'The consolidation of democracy versus democratization in Turkey', *Journal of Democracy*, 3 (1), 2002, p141.
- 53 Lowry, 'Betwixt and between', p 39.
- 54 'Secularism and democracy in Turkey', *The Guardian*, 1 May 2007.
- 55 A Przeworski, M Alvarez, JA Cheibub & F Limongi 'What makes democracies endure?', in L Diamond, MF Plattner, Y Chu & H Tien (eds), *Democracy in Developing Countries*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997; also see DL Epstein, R Bates, J Goldstone, I Kristensen & S O'Halloran, 'Democratic Transitions', *Journal of Democracy*, 50 (3) 2006, pp 551 – 569. All figures are in purchasing power parity US dollars. Nominal GNP per capita was \$5477 in 2006.
- 56 E Özbudun, 'Democratization reforms in Turkey, 1993–2004', *Journal of Democracy*, 8 (2), 2007, pp 179 – 196.

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