Bridging Islam and Democracy in Turkey: A Look into the AKP Controversy

The summer of 2008 was yet another turbulent one for Turkish politics. The closure case filed on 14 March 2008 by the Chief Prosecutor Abdurrahman Yalcinkaya against the country's ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-AKP) was not a novelty in itself. Twenty four political parties have been closed by the Turkish Constitutional Court since its foundation in 1962. Yet this was the first time a case was launched against an incumbent party. The reason for the closure was the party's transformation into a "focal point of anti-secular activities." The case was heard on 1 and 3 July, and on 30, the Court delivered its verdict. While six of the eleven judges agreed with the Prosecutor's proposal that the party be closed, they failed to reach the qualified majority of seven votes, necessary for such a decision. This meant that the party only faced a written warning and a curtailment of its state subsidy by 50 percent. So what coined as "Turkey's judicial coup" was averted at the last moment and for a single vote. The country avoided a major political crisis, early elections and an escalation of the tension between the secularist and the Islamist segments of the society which could have reached extremely dangerous dimensions. The decision came as a big relief for the Turkish financial market and was hailed by the international community as well as the supporters of Turkey's EU membership in Turkey and abroad.

What attracted though so much attention to the fate of this party? The very idea of banning a party which collected almost 47 percent of the vote in the July 2007 parliamentary elections based on inconclusive evidence would have made a travesty of Turkish democracy. Besides, the AKP has become the key political actor in the process of Turkey's democratisation reform. Despite its Islamist roots, the party has adopted a clear pro-European position since it took over power in November 2002 and has realised a reform programme, which was unprecedented in recent Turkish history. The AKP government's policy triggered the December 2004 decision of the European Council for the start of accession negotiations. Turkey's European dream seemed to come closer to realisation than ever, and this was due to a party with Islamist political roots. The debate whether Islam was the single most important factor for the virtual absence of democratic regimes in the Middle East has been ongoing since the "clash of civilisations" thesis was introduced. It was reinforced after the horrendous terror attacks of 11 September 2001 and the 2003 US occupation of Iraq. Some argued that Islam intrinsically failed to recognise the separation of religion and state, and this rendered impossible the emergence of a democratic regime in a Muslim country. The case of Turkey differed –they said– because of its radical secularisation programme.

When Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, launched a radical reform programme to "bring Turkey to the level of...
contemporary civilisation,” he aimed to put Islam into firm state control and minimise its social and political appeal. Islam was considered as one of the primary reasons for Ottoman underdevelopment. Turkey's modernisation was conditioned upon the development of a secular, “religion-free” society. Early republican attitudes towards religion were clearly reminiscent of French laicité. Islam came under direct state control and Islamic brotherhoods were closed. While references to Islam as official religion were removed, laicism (laiklik) was elevated to a principle of the Republic of Turkey. Nonetheless, the appeal of this top-down modernisation effort was limited beyond the circles of a secularist middle class which had espoused the principles of the Ataturk reform. The big majority of the Turkish people did not dismiss Islam and remained sceptical of the radical aspects of Ataturk’s modernisation programme. This became clear when multiparty politics were introduced in 1946. Parties which were deviating from the Kemalist secularist orthodoxy maintained a consistently strong popular appeal. The threat of Turkey's Islamisation became one of the main pretexts for the repeated military interventions and closures of parties with the alleged aim to turn Turkey into an Islamic state. Yet what escaped the attention of Turkish secularist elites was that the country was undergoing a parallel modernisation process. Alongside the Kemalist modernisation paradigm, an alternative path towards modernisation emerged. A new rising urban elite refused to dismiss Islam, was critical of the excesses of Kemalist reform and suggested a new version of Turkish modernity, which would combine Islamic and Western values. Members of this new Muslim bourgeoisie benefited the most from Turkey’s opening to the world economy in the 1980s. Eventually they saw the clear economic, political and social benefits of Turkey’s membership of the European Union.

The AKP, a product of the transformation of Turkish political Islam, became the political representative of this social movement. Having shed Islamist suspicions against “Christian Europe,” they subscribed to Turkey’s EU candidacy. Turkey’s European integration would set most favourable conditions for the country’s economic development. At the political level, the implementation of the Copenhagen Criteria for EU membership would inevitably lead to the consolidation of Turkish democracy. Turkey would realise her long-standing ambition to join the European zone of peace, stability and cooperation. At the social level, the establishment of a liberal, tolerant public sphere would help set a framework for full protection of human rights and mutual toleration between the diverse segments of Turkish society, secularists and Islamists, Turks and Kurds, Alevis or non-Muslims.

At the same time Turkey’s secularist elite which had traditionally represented the West failed to respond to the transformation of the political agenda of the AKP and suggest an alternative vision of Turkey’s European integration. This failure was exemplified in the case of the main opposition Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi-CHP). Instead of spearheading the EU reform process, it increasingly adopted a nationalistic, isolationist and phobic attitude towards the European Union which allowed the AKP to monopolise Turkey’s EU membership vocation. In effect, it identified with the most reactionary elements of the military and civil bureaucracy, which saw that Turkey’s democratic consolidation would mean the end of the tutelary role they enjoyed. In addition, it fomented the fears of the secularist middle class which became increasingly uneasy from the growing social and political clout of the social forces the AKP represented. The AKP was accused of using the European Union and democratisation as a window-dress for its real agenda, Turkey’s Islamisation. The candidacy of Abdullah Gul for the presidency of the country in April
2007 was interpreted as a symbolic step towards that direction. The concerted reaction of the CHP and the bureaucracy led to the July 2007 elections, a triumph for the AKP. Yet even after the elections the CHP continued its fear-mongering campaign on the issue of the alleged Islamisation threat, while it was insensitive to much more serious threats for Turkish democracy, such as the bureaucratic intervention into democratic politics and the existence of nationalist secularist terrorist groups such as the Ergenekon.

One should underline that the AKP was also responsible for allowing this climate of mutual suspicion to rise. In the years following 2004, the reform zeal clearly abated. The AKP was caught in the rising nationalist rhetoric which grew more suspicious against the European Union and vehemently opposed US foreign policy. The lack of progress regarding the rights of Alevi and non-Muslims also led to doubts about its commitment to human rights when these were not favouring Sunni Muslims. The AKP also failed to make any openings towards the secularist middle class, which would signal that lifting the limitations that Muslims faced would not result in the imposition of similar limitations on secularists. Focusing in the aftermath of the 2007 elections on the headscarf issue and not treating it in a context of a wider constitutional reform encapsulating the full protection of rights of all Turkish citizens was a grave tactical error. It allowed the CHP to instigate fears about a hidden Islamist agenda and gave the pretext to the Chief Prosecutor to file a closure case against the party. Despite its shortcomings, the AKP is still –given the absence of a secularist pro-European party– the main actor of democratic change. With its solid parliamentary majority it can re-launch a democratisation reform programme which could bring Turkey closer to EU membership and also lift all suspicions about its true intentions at the domestic level. Due to its popular origins, the AKP is also uniquely positioned to influence the bulk of Turkey's population towards the adoption of the European project. Socialising the majority of Turkish people into European liberal democratic values is a difficult task. Yet no party is better poised to achieve this than the AKP. Its success could also have a positive effect on the relations between Europe and Islam. More importantly, the success of the AKP experiment is a powerful example in defence of the compatibility of Islam and democracy. Parties with Islamist political roots are not inherent enemies of democracy, but can be co-opted to its cause, if proper incentives are given and policies implemented. This can inform global strategies regarding political Islam and promotion of democracy. In light of this, with the court decision of 30 July the effort to reconcile Islam and democracy escaped a grave blow.

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