

DEMOCRATIC ISLAM: A CASE STUDY OF JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY OF TURKEY

Adam Saud¹ and Kashif Ali Khan²

¹ Head of Department, Humanities and Social Sciences, Bahria University, Islamabad,

² Internee, Brookings institute, Washington DC, USA.

Correspondent's email Address: adam@bui.edu.pk

ABSTRACT: *There has been a constant debate among the Muslim and western scholars whether Islam is compatible with democracy or not. This article has tried to give an insight into this debate by taking Turkey's Justice and Development Party commonly known as AKP as a case study. The successful economic development and consolidation of democracy under AKP is a lesson for the other religious political parties active in the Muslim world.*

Key Words: *Religion, Politics, Military, Economic and Foreign policy.*

INTRODUCTION

Religion has always been an important part of mankind's life since its beginning. People have used it as an important variable in directing their social, political and personal lives as well as the most notable influence on their ideological footings. All major and small religions of the world have never been able to deny political tendencies and inclinations. While both religion and politics have always remained interconnected, it has been observed that often one absorbs the other and the distinction between the domain of each becomes more and more blurred. Amongst the major religions of the world, Islam is perhaps politically most relevant. It has been able to unite both political as well as social movements under its banner throughout its history and has remained the source of political and social mentorship for majority of its followers, a number which has crossed the one billion mark.

While Islam's relevance to the political sphere has never been under question even from the firmest of its critics, its compatibility with democracy especially with the concept of modern liberal democracy has remained a topic of immense discussion by both its critics and followers. Upon a closer look at the historical examples where an Islamic State has been in place in the closest arrangement possible to its teachings, it becomes evident that Islam is no more a hurdle to democracy as is Christianity or Judaism. Like the ideals of Western liberal democracies, Islam propagates for individual human rights, rule of law and the accountability of rulers. These fundamental propagations of political Islam make sure, for instance, that even a strictly Islamic state like Iran cannot eliminate democracy as a system of government. However, the evolution of politics over the years has placed religion in a very complex situation [1].

The conflicting nature between different societies, especially Islam and the West has stigmatized each other's ideologies including their political systems. Today the real dispute between Islam and Democracy is not that of compatibility and attainment, but of the democracy being a "foreign" system of government with its firm roots in a society which has been clashing with the Islamic society for a large part of the last thousand or so years.

Similarly the contemporary Western point of view on Islam and democracy has largely been influenced by examples from the post-colonial era where democracy became the predominant and preferred system of government around the world but a majority of Islamic states, especially in the

Middle East – the birthplace of Islam – were and are ruled by authoritative rulers with almost zero room for transparency and accountability. In essence however, this trend has largely been due to various socio-economic factors rather than Islam playing a major role.

Democracy In Turkey

The question whether Islam and democracy are compatible has strong implications not only for Muslim public around the world but also in defining the post 9/11 international political and economic order. In this article, we would look at Turkey as a case study after coming into power of the Justice and Development Party in 2002, whose Islamic outlook and democratic ideals have not only transformed Turkey's political and economic power but has also put the country into a transition back from a secular state into an Islamic state.

While Turkey in the recent times has never been looked at as an ideal for the Muslim world due to its secular orientation or as one may argue Europeanization; its recent success in merging Islamic ideals with the Western democratic model has transformed its position not only in the Western world but also in the community of Islamic nations where it is looked more and more as role model for socioeconomic and political progress. Our focus in this research is to look at conditions which called for the creation of the Justice and Development Party in a stern secular state. This research also looks at the pragmatic policy approach of the AKP which has enabled it to remain connected to its Islamic ideology while still adopting many of the Western principles especially in terms of economic and social development.

Military, Democracy and Religion:

The Background

Islamic politics in Turkey has largely been a reactionary activity due to the country's secular dispositions after the breaking up of the Ottoman Empire. The country's political and social ideology has largely been *Kemalism* ever since the inception of the Turkish 'Republic' in 1923 [2]. In the process of rapid modernization; Islamic education, imperial legacies and Sufi roots, all of which have been instrumental in defining Turkey's identity in the last thousand years were eliminated or reduced from the society.

These measures, however, never completely infiltrated the Turkish society, especially the rural non-elite classes. The modernization largely remained confined to urban elites, the army and political office holders. Throughout the years during the cold war, this secularization remained intact

mainly due to the anti-communism tendencies of the Islamists and the society at large as well as the secular army's continuous meddling with the political affairs which intervened thrice from the 60s to the 80s and tried to keep the country on its secular discourse [3].

However the end of the cold war and the subsequent political and economic instability in the country which followed throughout the 90s gave an opportunity to the parties from the right and right of the center. The 90s as marked with a host of coalition governments in Turkey whose times were marked with economic turmoil, bad governance, insurgencies in the Kurdish territories and blunt polarization in the society [4].

Under such circumstances, the need for a middle way was widely needed which would try to minimize the secular/Islamist divide between the two poles and bring the country back onto the right track for economic and social development. AKP, which won a landslide victory with 34 percent seats in 2002 [5], was formed just a year earlier by politicians from a number of different political and ideological backgrounds. Its most prominent leadership came from the *Islamist Virtue Party* [6] but in essence the AKP was a merger of many likeminded political parties and to extent individuals who wanted to give a voice to the moderate Islamic politics of the country; an area which had been willfully suppressed in the post-Ottoman era.

AKP's predecessor, The *Islamist Virtue Party* was brought to a closure in 2001 after a decision by Turkey's constitutional court about its activities being contrary to the state's secular principles. This decision created the space for the creation of AKP in a country which had collapsed in to a major financial crises (Turkey's growth rate was -5.7 percent in 2001) [7] and the public opinion increasingly discredited the existing political parties from both the right and left of the political continuum.

While the country's conservative circles as well as the general public welcomed the creation of a party based on social conservative ideals, its landslide victory in the elections of 2002 was hardly expected. The fact that no other party secured even 10% of the popular vote [8] reflected the frustration of Turkish public with the liberal-military duo which had dominated the Turkish politics ever since its inception as a republic.

AKP's success in the 2002 election created ripples throughout the world and a sense of concern in many Western countries especially in Europe. For the Western powers, it was a double edged sword. If an Islamic reformist party like the AKP succeeded to stay in power with popular public support, Turkey's secular image and its alliance with the West could have been jeopardized. On the other hand, if the AKP government failed and did not enjoy good relations with the secular Turkish army, its ouster can lead to another political crises in Turkey hurting democracy at large.

The AKP however, surprised everyone including its supporters by its output. While staying committed to its Islamic reformist agenda, the AKP and *Tayyip Erdogan* worked consistently towards democratic governance and modernization of Turkey [9]. Even from a foreign policy perspective, Turkey has remained a sturdy ally of the West

and if anything, it has increased its influence throughout Europe and the Islamic world.

Domestic and Foreign Policies of AKP Party Political Policies

With regards to promoting democracy at home, the AKP has given strong consideration to decentralization and capacity building of local governments [10]. The environment of democratic consolidation through the increased role of civil society has helped maintain Turkey's image as a strong democracy even under an Islamic-tilted administration. Religiously too, the AKP has not tried to bring drastic changes to Turkey's broad social norms as a secular state. Throughout its rule, religious freedom has continued to be looked at as an important variable in improving and maintaining order in the Turkish society.

The success of AKP at social and economic spheres has made a more intrinsic impact on the Turkish public where many liberal circles have started to acknowledge Islam and its economic and political principles as a successful system for improving the life of common man. It has led to a renewed interest in religion by an upcoming younger generation which though moderate in its views, looks at Islam as an influential indicator in their social lives.

Economic Policies

The reformist ideology of the AKP has not been limited to the social and political spheres of life. The country, whose economic performance had been atrocious throughout the 90s managed to rise as one of the most rapidly growing economies of the world and a serious contender for EU. The economic performance of the AKP administration can be quantified by the fact that the per capita income of Turkey rose from \$2,800 U.S. in 2001 to \$10,530 US in 2015 [11]. The low rates of inflation and successes of private enterprises have improved the standard of living considerably [12].

Contrary to what many believed about AKP's role in driving Turkey's political and economic discourse; it has continued to lead Turkey towards modernization and liberalization of its economy. AKP has given strong emphasis on liberalizing the Turkish economy and on foreign direct investment. It has continued to remain committed to IMF's policies especially with privatization of major industries and an open market. If there has been one area where the AKP has changed its stance from its predecessors, it has been the area of social development. The incorporation of the idea of social justice and the start of welfare programs on an initial level are a few things which have their footings in an Islamic welfare system.

Civil-Military Relationship

Throughout its first term, the AKP led Turkey with a reformist agenda where it looked to bring Turkey's age old problems like civil-military relations and human rights practices in line with those accepted in a true democracy. Keeping the military out of politics has been a key source of concern for all Turkish administrations since the inception of the new state. However, the AKP, with popular public support has successfully neutralized military's meddling into the political process [13] like coup attempts by more secular Generals and increasing pressures on the administration to decrease the pace of welfare reforms.

Foreign Policy

Looking at AKP's time from a foreign policy perspective, one does not see much change or rigidity in its stance on international issues as well as its case for European Union. In fact its stance on disputed territories like Cyprus has been more compromising than the earlier administrations. The Turkish army has historically been the reason behind an aggressive persuasion of the issue which has hurt Turkey's case for EU on more than a few occasions. However, the reforms by AKP which tried to minimize the military's role from the politics led to a softer and more independent stance on the Cyprus issue which even led to the AKP government's backing of UN plans for a possible reunification of the island. Nonetheless, in the last decade, Turkey has assumed a proactive role in the politics of the Muslim world and has become a strong voice when it comes to issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or mediation in the Afghan dialogue. Tayyip Erdogan's continued support for the Palestinian cause and an often aggressive stance towards Israel has often been looked at as a major foreign policy shift from a state which historically has had relatively cooperative ties with Israel when compared to other Muslim countries of the world. It is remarkable to note here that while taking this leadership role in the recent years, Turkey has not compromised its national goals like its demand for EU membership or its active participation in NATO.

These policies throughout the last decade have been a part of AKP's continuous claim that they are a party more close to the center than to the right. Such policy inclinations have led to the AKP being called more and more *conservative democrat* than the earlier labels like *Islamist*.

The Secular – Islamic Divide

Though, AKP's inception, its coming into power and its reformist agenda has been welcomed by many, there has been strict criticism on its policies by the more liberal secularist circles as well. Having enjoyed political power since the country's beginning, secular circles, led by the army have continuously remained AKP's strongest critics and on many occasions, the biggest threat for it [14]. The recent cases against the military officers-both serving and retired-on charges of attempted coup by the AKP government have proven this threat. The promotion of religious values by the government is another issue of bone of contention between the military and AKP.

The divide was first brought on to Centre stage when the AKP government decided to lift the ban on headscarves in universities and ending discrimination against graduates of Islamic schools in the public sphere. These steps, while largely welcomed, brought uproar in the more secular circles which were enraged over the steps calling them a strict violation of the country's secular identity. These tensions continued as the administration attempted to make other reforms like criminalizing adultery and discouraging the sale of alcohol throughout the country [15].

The divide reached a boiling point with the nomination of Abdullah Gul – perceived by many as a strict Islamist – for the Presidency which almost made the army stage a coup at the AKP government. The constitutional courts, too, on the

other hand took the government head-on for trying to challenge the secular direction of the republic. The government however, refused to succumb to pressures from the military and Abdullah Gul was made the President after the party won a landslide victory in the 2007 elections with almost 47 percent of the popular vote compared to 34 percent from 2002 [16].

The election results came as a public admonition of the military's stance and instilled a sense of new confidence into the AKP administration. The election results also led to the constitutional courts giving a decision against the closure of the party, even though just by one vote.

Due to such strong opposition, AKP has been reluctant in directly challenging the secular establishment even though it enjoys strong public support and has looked to build national consensus with other stakeholders in the political system especially when it comes to reforms in the social schema.

AKP: A Model For Modern Islamic Politics

The success of AKP in Turkish politics and its wide range acceptance by both domestic and international audience proves that the room for Islamic politics has not shrunk across the Muslim world. The AKP's socioeconomic development, its support for democratic values in the society and good governance has proved to be the perfect model for governance without compromising on its ideology.

AKP's biggest strength has been its pragmatic assessment of Muslim politics in Turkey. The Party and its government have come to the realization that any Muslim group within the state would be able to promote their viewpoint only in the presence of a democratic system instead of forcing reformation upon the people. The AKP has sought the propagation of Islamic values in promoting a just and transparent governance system which will benefit both the public as well as the party's politics.

The AKP, although being Islamist in its outlook, has largely acted pragmatically while taking a policy stance whether on international or domestic issues. The fact that it likes being called conservative democrat gives an insight into the party's understanding of the Turkish political landscape where its main emphasis is on gradual change instead of radical assertive change whether secular or Islamic.

This approach has not only given more credibility to its rule inside Turkey but has proven to the rest of the world especially the major powers that a government with strong Islamic roots can also be a reliable ally. It can be assumed that America and its European allies' soft response towards the Arab Spring was in part motivated by the very reason that Islamist governments can also be tolerated given they are elected through democratic means and are willing to embrace liberal policies and values [17].

CONCLUSION

The popularity of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Turkey should not be contributed solely to its inclination towards Islam and a shift away from secularization. The reason for the success of AKP is largely due to its strong organizational structure, good governance and its success in creating a fusion of Islamic and liberal models of governance

which have led to a rapid growth of the Turkish economy and social development. It is indeed a great achievement of the AKP government that it has continued to keep the army from meddling into the political affairs of the state and has promoted civil democracy based solely on popular public support.

The transformation which the Turkish society has gone through in the last decade should be looked at as a transitional process rather than that of a radical ideological shift. There has not been a forced ideological change in the social fabric by the government but its successful management of the country's affairs is bringing more and more people closer to the party's ideology. The successful performance based experiment of the AKP in Turkey proves that there is no divergence between Islam and democracy on an ideological basis and the two can not only work in combination but are often suited for each other.

REFERENCES

1. Eliane UrsulaEttmueller, "Islam and Democracy." *Astrolabio: Revista internacional de filosofía*, 2006: 16-18.
2. The ideas and principles of Mustafa Kamal Atatürk, the founder and first President of the secular Turkish Republic.
3. Military took over government in Turkey three times; 1960, 1971 and 1980.
4. Global Security, "Justice and Development Party (AKP)", n.d. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/europe/tu-political-party-akp.htm> (accessed March 22, 2014).
5. Sonar Cagapty, "The November 2002 Elections and Turkey's New Political Era", Meria, URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/opeds/4225defa40e83.pdf>.
6. Islamist political party established in 1998 was banned in June 2001 for violating the secular articles of the constitution.
7. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?page=2>
8. Sonar Cagapty, "The November 2002 Elections and Turkey New Political Era", Meria, URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/opeds/4225defa40e83.pdf>
9. Chairman of the AKP and then Prime Minister of Turkey.
10. http://pure.rhul.ac.uk/portal/files/778665/Decentralisation%20in%20Turkey_C009.pdf
11. Data.worldbank.org.
12. ÖmerTaşpınar, "Turkey: The New Model?", Wilson Center and the U.S. Institute of Peace, April, 2012. URL:<http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/04/24-turkey-new-model-taspinar>
13. Mehmet Bardakçı, "Coup Plots and the Transformation of Civil-Military Relations in Turkey under AKP Rule", *Turkish Studies*, Vol.14, No.3, 2013, pp. 411-428.
14. EmrePeker, "Turkish Officers Acquitted Over Coup Plot", *The Wall Street Journal*, 31stMarch 2015. URL: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkish-military-officers-acquitted-over-coup-plot-1427813996>
15. ÖmerTaşpınar, Op. Cit.,
16. Manuel Álvarez-Rivera, "Election Resources on the Internet: Elections to the Turkish Grand National Assembly", 12th June 2011, URL: <http://electionresources.org/tr/>.
17. Ahmet TKuru, "Muslim Politics Without an Islamic State", Policy Briefing, Doha: Brookings Doha Center, 2013. URL:http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2013/02/21-akp-model-kuru/bdc_akp-model_kuru.pdf