

TURKEY AND EGYPT: WHERE IS THE MODEL?

Turkey has established itself as a secular democracy that is steadily progressing towards achieving equal rights for women. The economic crisis Turkey was in at the beginning of the century has been replaced with an economic miracle by the Islamist government in power for the last decade. The recent transformation of the “Arab Awakening” into an “Islamic Spring” has made Turkey an attractive model for many countries in this region. In this article, the case of Egypt is examined in detail, taking up the similarities and differences between Egypt and Turkey. The question posed is, in light of the rising conservatism of the rule of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, will Turkey continue to be a model, particularly for women’s rights?

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Since the spark that led to the Arab Spring was ignited, and the dream of political change became a reality, one of the most frequently asked, yet widely unanswered, question remains the nature of this change. While the factors that led to the Arab Spring may have been largely similar across the countries affected, the differing composition and dynamics of each of these countries render it virtually impossible to predict a widely applicable system of government that will prevail. A superficial look at Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, for example, reveals a host of different social, economic, and demographic issues that make it difficult to forecast what model they will follow. The



Turkish model has often been raised as one possibility, particularly by political Islamists who have recently concluded a rapid rise to power in Egypt. While the reference to Turkey could merely be a tactic to allay the fears of critics of political Islam, and assure them that Egypt will not turn into another Iran, Pakistan, or even worse another Afghanistan, the comparisons do indeed have some merit. Turkey may in fact be a viable model.

The Right Model for Egypt

Turkey's road to democracy has not been easy. However, it has established itself as a democracy that stood the test of time. The Turkish model demonstrates that Islam is not inherently incompatible with Western-style democracy. For the past decade, Turkey has been governed by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), a political party that makes no secret of its Islamic roots, yet describes itself as a conservative-democrat party that fully accepts Turkey's secular system of government.

Within this decade, the AKP has managed to achieve an economic miracle. At the end of 2000, shortly before the AKP ascended to power, Turkey suffered a grave economic crisis, with hyperinflation of 700 percent, a collapse of the local currency, a surge in national debt, and an unemployment rate above 40 percent. The AKP has managed, however, to carry the country from the brink of bankruptcy to a successful economy ranking 15th globally in terms of GDP, with an annual per capita income

of 13,500 dollars based on purchasing power parity. While Turkey's economic miracle has put it on par with some European countries, its success story has also consolidated internal stability and aided democratization. The start of accession talks between Turkey and the EU is a testimony to these accomplishments. Although Turkey has often been cited as a model for the coexistence of Islam and secularism, Islam is still a profound factor in Turkish politics.

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The Turkish model bears special significance to the case of Egypt. The two countries share a common history, and religion, and belong to the same neighborhood; factors which have all created many similarities between the two nations. They enjoy close historical relations that have varied and evolved from politics through the Ottoman Empire and extended to intermarriages. In fact, some of Egypt's legislation dates back to the Ottoman Empire. The far reaching reforms and modernization efforts of Egypt's Mohammad Ali Pasha in the 19th century came at a time when the Ottoman Empire was struggling to reverse its decline. Those reform efforts coincided and actually guided Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II's modernization efforts, in what could be termed as a reverse “model” example.

With the formidable success of the contemporary Turkish Islamist experience, and with the rise of political Islam in Egypt, many international and local experts have promoted Turkey as a model for Egypt to follow. This model opens a window of opportunity for both countries by further energizing relations with a flurry of bilateral activities and visits at the highest political, business, and civil society levels. In the midst of Egypt's acute economic crisis, the results of neoliberal economic policies in Turkey offer a unique insight into one of the most successful transformations of an Islamic movement in the Muslim world. The Egyptian Islamists have been criticized for talking solely about *Shariah* and *Hodoud*, displaying Islamic beards, praying for the ruler in mosques, giving him an almighty status, and criminalizing those who oppose him – exactly like the Ottoman Caliphate.¹ The Egyptian Islamists are still unable to find a vision that translates their ideals into concrete benefit and welfare for their citizens. Many accordingly have seen them to be emulating Sultanic Ottoman Turkey rather than Atatürk or Erdoğan's Turkish renaissance.

Erdogan was welcomed as a hero when he visited Egypt in early 2012, the first post-revolution visit by a head of government. He dropped a bombshell when he declared

¹ Mahmoud Khalil, “Egypt the Sultanic Turkey,” *Al Watan Newspaper*, 22 August 2012.

that he is in favor of a secular regime despite being a Muslim, much to the chagrin of Egyptian Islamists who are still particularly obsessed with the *Daa'wa* and have not yet developed their vision for the welfare and development of the Egyptian people.²

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Perhaps it is still too early to judge the Islamists, as they are still euphoric over their long-awaited victory. They still believe that they can disseminate their conservatism through the Constitution and extraordinary measures. The Egyptian Islamists need time to benefit from the unique Turkish experience that succeeded in creating a high level of harmony between religion and modern society, delivering economic development, and securing relative welfare for the ordinary citizen in living and education. Two years after the Egyptian awakening, ordinary citizens still do not

appear to be a priority for the Muslim Brotherhood. Securing quality education for their children, decent jobs for their graduates, and a space for everyone to exercise their freedom of expression by words or art, has not yet surfaced as their top priority.³

The Egyptian Islamists have not won their battle with the youth which led the awakening in January 2011. The youth still remain in a state of political confusion and bewilderment. They led the quest for freedom and equality but self-centered politicians, who never had the courage to stand up to the old regime themselves, have now leapfrogged the revolutionaries to power. This state of political confusion is not only restricted to the youth but is more widespread, diverting attention away from the crucial and time-sensitive nation-building goals. As Egypt's economy is in free fall, it is a time when all political forces should put the overall good of the country ahead of ideological differences. Unfortunately, this is not happening yet. Furthermore, the lack of a charismatic, unifying leader or a common national aspiration, such as Turkey's EU ambitions, has left the country in unprecedented polarization.

2 “Islamists Criticize Turkish Premier's ‘Secular’ Remarks,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 September 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111904491704576570670264116178.html>

3 Mahmoud Khalil (2012).

Women in Turkey and Egypt

Both countries bear witness to a similar struggle for equal rights for women. In Egypt's case, the story is one of both success and frustration. The overall result has been, however, a successful one – with Egyptian women making strides in their fight for equal rights.

Successful integration into political and economic life, and education, among others, are all interrelated, and all have to be supported from the grassroots as well as from a national policy perspective.

Throughout its long history, Egypt has been a religious and civilized country, with the religion card occasionally used against women. The rise or demise of the state also determines the status of women. With their perseverance, however, Egyptian women have managed to maintain the struggle and build on their achievements. They reached the forefront in leadership positions since the time of the Pharaohs, where they led the

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army and served as heads of state. Women became ministers, judges, ambassadors, rectors, and pilots to name but a few professions. Egypt came in first place in terms of number of women in leadership roles in *Forbes*' "Middle East Top 100 Arab Businesswomen." Egyptian public, joint stock companies have 20 women in leadership and senior executive positions. With 17 women, Kuwait came in second.⁴ According to the World Bank's development report, women's earning power in Egypt stands at 82 percent of men's earning power – a ratio which places Egypt ahead of developed countries such as Iceland, and Germany. Sixty percent of these women, however, work in the informal sector, with much of the rest working in the public sector.⁵ Female participation in the labor market is 23.1 percent in Egypt compared to 29 percent in Turkey. According to the 2012 Global Gender Gap index, both countries lag in equality, with Turkey ranking 124th and Egypt 126th among 135 countries. Turkey's female literacy rate stands at 85 percent and ranks 105th, while Egypt's rate is 64 percent and ranks 116th. The same index ranks Turkey at 108th in Educational attainment, and Egypt 110th. Female enrollment in primary education in Turkey is 97 percent and ranks 108th, while Egypt is 94 percent, ranking 117th. Turkish girls in secondary education are 71 percent, though ranked 111th in terms

4 "Middle East Top 100 Arab Businesswomen," *Forbes Middle East*, May 2012.

5 World Bank Development report 2012-Map-1, http://wdronline.worldbank.org/worldbank/a/c.html/world_development_report_2012/overview

of the gap between males and females, while Egypt with 69 percent girls enrolment in secondary education ranked 103rd in terms of the gender gap.⁶

Egyptian women obtained the right to vote in 1956. Rawya Attia became the first female elected to Parliament in 1957. Women occupied 36 of 458 seats in the 1984 Parliament. At the time, a quota for female representatives was in place, but was later repealed. In 2010, the quota system was re-established with 64 out of 508 seats reserved for women. Women also won a number of seats in direct competition with men over and above those of the quota. However, without any public debate, the quota was once again quietly repealed in March 2011, less than two months after the revolution. As a result, women won only 10 out of 508 seats in Egypt's post-revolution parliament, two of those being directly appointed. At two percent, this number is far below global and regional averages.

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Though it has never had a gender quota, parliamentary representation of Turkish women has been steadily rising, reaching 14 percent in the 2011 general elections. Women only constitute four percent in ministerial positions in Turkey, whereas in Egypt, it is 10 percent. Also, gender gap scores between 2006-12 improved by 3.2 percent in Egypt and only 2.7 percent in Turkey.⁷ Women

constitute less than one percent of mayors in Turkey, there is only one female governor (among 81), and 20 female provincial district governors. Egypt has no female governors and only four female mayors.

Turkey was blessed with the Atatürk experience which furthered women's causes. Atatürk abolished the Caliphate and established a modern, secular state. The Atatürk experience largely cleansed piety and traditions that clashed with logic. Turkish women enjoy more rights than their Egyptian sisters as a result of Atatürk's reform movement. Polygamy was banned, divorce and inheritance rights were made equal – a luxury Egyptian women do not have to this day, with no progress in sight any-time soon. By 1934, Turkey gave women their full political rights whereas Egyptian women got them 20 years later.

⁶ “Global Gender Gap Index 2012,” *World Economic Forum*, <http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2012>

⁷ Ibid.

Since it came to power in 2002, the AKP continued the legacy with unprecedented reforms to protect women. Turkish civil law equalized the rights of women and men during marriage, divorce, and any subsequent property rights. As of 2004, Turkish Penal Code deals with female sexuality as a matter of individual rights, rather than as a matter of family honor. Unlike Egyptians, Turkish women enjoy equal rights to property acquired during marriage, in recognition of the economic value of women's labor within the family. Both countries established family courts, labor laws were instituted to prohibit sexism, and programs were created to educate men against domestic violence, and improve the girl's access to education. Egypt's National Council for Childhood and Motherhood program on girls' education (2003-9) has been hailed by UNICEF as a flagship program. On the other hand, the election of Tansu Çiller as the first female Prime Minister of Turkey is an achievement unmatched by Egypt. Turkey was the first country to have a woman as the President of its Constitutional Court, while Egypt only had a judge as vice president of its Constitutional Court in 2003. In addition, the Turkish Council of State, the Supreme Court for administrative cases, also has a woman judge as its President, yet the Egyptian Council of State still refuses to allow female judges.

Egyptian and Turkish women share common successes and suffer the gap between laws versus their implementation and discrepancy between formal rights and the social position of women.⁸ The issue of sexual harassment and sexual violence is now instigated and feminist discourse has been institutionalized in both countries. The minimum age of marriage is 18 in both countries (although Turkey allows marriage at the age of 17 with parental consent). In cases of forced marriage, Turkish women have the right to ask for an annulment within the first five years of marriage, unlike Egyptians. The 2004 Turkish Penal Code criminalizes marital rape and prevents sentence reductions that were granted to perpetrators of honor killings in the previous Penal Code. Egyptian legislation does not recognize marital rape, let alone criminalize it. Domestic violence, child marriage, and human trafficking are among the widespread forms of violence in both countries.

Despite gradual advancements, women continue to be marginalized in both countries. Issues pertaining to women's rights or empowerment were not a significant part of the debate in the run-up of Turkey's 2011 parliamentary elections, just as they were widely disregarded in Egypt's post revolution elections.

The Rise of Political Islam and Women in Turkey and Egypt

Political Islam is on the rise in the Middle East. Women in both Turkey and Egypt fear that their quest for equal rights will be derailed and their achieved rights

⁸ "Behind the Veil: Women's Influence in Politics is Growing, but It is Still Small," *The Economist*, 12 May 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/18682644>

threatened. Egyptian women were the first to get the taste of its impact. Two years into the Arab Spring, reality for women has been sobering.

The dynamics of the revolution have produced a very complex situation for women, as the rise of conservative political Islam puts the breaks on Arab women's struggle for equal rights. Although they emerged as a formidable active voting bloc of nearly 25 million people, Egyptian women were systematically ignored by political parties and candidates, both by Islamists and liberals, during the parliamentary and presidential elections. Women have been left out of the process of post-revolution nation building and were marginalized during the process of drafting the Constitution with fractional representation. The emerging conservative discourse has systematically pushed women back to their traditional domestic role akin to their centuries-old status. The post-revolution Islamist Constitution threatens to relegate the status of women seriously, and widen the gap even more between Turkish and Egyptian women.

The Turkish Constitution identifies the state as a secular democracy and commits it to take all necessary measures to promote the equality of sexes. Article 10 bans any discrimination, public or private, on the grounds of sex. Article 41 states that the family is “based on equality between spouses.”⁹

The Egyptian Constitution of 1971 committed the state to ensure equality between sexes in all aspects of life, provided that it does not violate provisions of *Shariah*. Women struggled to remove the caveat of *Shariah*.¹⁰ Whereas, the 2012 post-revolution Constitution removed the article altogether. Article 10, which is devoted to the family, is the sole article in the new constitution that identifies women as a distinct group. Placed under moral foundations of the society and not under rights, the article states that the “family [is] founded on religion, morality, and patriotism,” and the State's commitment is to “preserve the genuine character of the Egyptian family, and to protect its moral values.” The article preserved one sentence from the 1971 text on “the reconciliation between the duties of a woman toward her family and her work.” It removed the state's commitment to enable such reconciliation and left this burden on women's shoulders. The article does not establish any rights for women. It places public morals above fundamental individual rights, as “defined by law.”

The state's responsibility to guarantee equality between men and women, a basic tenet of all Egyptian constitutions since 1923, was removed altogether from the 2012 Constitution. Had the Constitution included a sound provision on equality and

9 “The Constitution of the Republic of Turkey,” *Constitutional Court Website*, http://www.anayasa.gov.tr/images/loaded/pdf_dosyalari/the_constitution_of_the_republic_of_turkey.pdf

10 I personally proposed that when asked to present my views to Constitutional Council by its Secretary General.

non-discrimination, women would not need special reference. Unfortunately, the Constitution lacks such provisions. In paternalistic language, Article 8 indicates that the state “ensures achieving justice, equality and freedom, along with channels of social charity and solidarity...to protect honor and property and provide adequate subsistence as regulated by legislation.” Article 33 comes under the chapter of Personal Rights, stating that “all citizens are equal before the law, in public rights and duties without discrimination.” This provision does not prohibit discrimination on the grounds of sex. It does not mention personal rights, where discrimination is most omnipresent. Article 73 prohibits “all forms of oppression, forced exploitation of humans and sex trade.” It links sex trade –which was not mentioned in previous constitutions– to forced labor.

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Egypt’s post-revolution Constitution assigns a greater role for religion. “Principles” of *Shariah* remain the source of legislation. Article 219 interprets Article 2 by effectively turning “principles” into the more restrictive “provisions”, which can vary according to the personal conviction of clerics who will have the final word over the laws that translate such broad terms. It gives a non-elected and non-judicial body, the authority over the legislature and democratically elected bodies. Article 11 tacitly gives the state the right to “safeguard ethics, public morality and religious and patriotic values.”

Contrary to the 1971 Constitution, which included no reference to any religious entity, Article 4 solicits al-Azhar’s interpretation of *Shariah*. Together these articles raise concern about religion having a stronger role in justice and law enforcement. Article 76 which sets the legitimacy of crimes and punishments, opens the door for the judge to choose a penalty (not stipulated by law), based on a constitutional provision, based on *Shariah* as defined by Articles 2 and 219. Defenders of women rights fear that this leaves law enforcement open to interpretation, and potentially could lead to abolition of acquired rights such as unilateral divorce and child custody. The deliberate omission of human trafficking, servitude or slavery add to such fears and signals intentions to lower the minimum age for marriage, which is currently at 18.¹¹ It may also lead to the application of *Hodoud*.

¹¹ Yasser Burhamy of Salafis among others defended child marriage not only as low as 9, but even 7 and 6 years old.

Some Turkish women criticize Turkey's overtly pious Prime Minister Erdoğan for setting the wrong tone. "His diatribes against divorce and calls for women to bear at least three children have made things worse".¹² They flag his stand against abortion and statement in 1994 as mayor of Istanbul that women should never be allowed to enter the innermost circle of political leadership, because this was against "human nature". Turkish women also blame Erdoğan for dismissing female self-determination as "female propaganda". They accuse him for not honoring his pact with many liberal Turks in return for their support in the election. Women criticize his confession in 2010 "I don't believe in equality between men and women" and in 2011 he attributed rising honor killings to increased news coverage.¹³ Furthermore, the Prime Minister is accused of attempts to modify social structures through education when he said "we will raise a religious generation" while launching his education reform program. In addition, he has "transformed the Presidency of Religious Affairs into a massive agency with a budget of 1.6 billion dollars, more than the budgets of Turkey's European Union, foreign, energy and environment ministries combined." Critics also claim that his "authoritarian treatment of artists has almost Sultanesque overtones."¹⁴

With these shifts, Turkish women have realized that the rights they had taken for granted were under threat.¹⁵ They proclaim that Turkey is backsliding on women's rights, and that progress is being undermined by Turkey's flagging prospects for EU membership and an Islamic inspired government that is increasingly embracing the conservative values of the Arab world that it seeks to lead.¹⁶

Conclusion

The cause of women has been an issue since the outset of the revolutions and the "Spring" has unfortunately turned into an autumn for women, or a spring without flowers. Two years into the Arab Spring, it is evident that Islamic conservatism limits women's role in public life. Egypt's post-revolution Constitution has assigned religion a stronger role over legislation; it relegated the status of women, puts the state's commitment to ensure equal rights for women into question, and places women's rights at risk.

¹² The Economist (2011).

¹³ Daniel Steinvorth, "Erdogan the Misogynist Turkish Prime Minister Assaults Women's Rights," *Der Spiegel*, 19 June 2012, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/turkish-prime-minister-erdogan-targets-women-s-rights-a-839568.html>

¹⁴ Daniel Steinvorth (2012).

¹⁵ Daniel Steinvorth (2012).

¹⁶ "Women See Worrisome Shift in Turkey," *The New York Times*, 25 April 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/26/world/europe/women-see-worrisome-shift-in-turkey.html?_r=0

In joining the struggle to bring down former president Hosni Mubarak, Egyptian women were also fighting for their personal liberty. Today it seems that toppling the old dictatorship was in fact a Trojan horse for women and their rights. Egyptian women need to use their formidable voting power and political activism to consolidate their efforts in order to maintain and build on their gains until they achieve their inalienable rights.

Egyptian women stand to benefit if the ruling Islamists were guided by the Turkish example. Turkey's modern state has been greatly aided by the country's foundation principles on gender equality laid down by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. More recent contributing factors are its stable democracy and Ankara's focus on meeting the criteria to qualify for EU accession – a goal which has not diminished with the AKP's rise to power a decade ago. Turkey's leaders appear to have a more progressive mentality of placing the common good of the country above their ideological beliefs.

Which model will survive, and who will emulate whom?

Will the Egyptian Islamists, who view Turkey as a model in economic development, consider Turkey as a model in women's rights? What's more, will Turkey continue to be a model, or will the pressure towards more Islamization make Egypt's Islamists the model, instead? In the absence of charismatic political leadership or a national goal that unites all Egyptians, will Egypt be blessed with an incentive similar to that of EU accession to put it on the right path? A path that will take it out of the economic doldrums, away from religious rhetoric, and towards a culture of respect for human rights, gender equality, and social prosperity. Dare I dream of a Turkish-type renaissance?