

WHO REALLY WANTS A “MUSLIM DEMOCRACY”?

The term “Muslim democracy” is an oxymoron because democracies by definition cannot take religion as a reference point. It is also unfair to the religion because in a Muslim democracy, democracy deficits will be attributed to Islam. These days it is fashionable among Westerners to brand Turkey as a model country for the Middle East. This practice not only favors the ruling AKP but also disregards an important reality of Turkey’s political evolution: without secularism, AKP would not have ever existed. So the Islamists in the Arab world would need to first adopt a secular democracy, and then take AKP as a model. A question left lingering is, are they interested in doing this?

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The headline of an article published in *The Economist* on 17 February 2011 was self-explanatory to summarize the motives behind the Turkish “Muslim democracy” model that I will elaborate on in this article. The article was entitled: “Turkey’s election: A Muslim democracy in action,” and was followed by the sub-headline: “Popular uprisings in the Arab world are drawing new attention to the example of Turkey’s democracy,”

“Here again”, I thought, “we are facing familiar attempts to sacrifice the unique Turkish experiment of secular democracy by deforming it so that it can be more palatable for those in the Middle East.” I said “same attempts” because they have been tried since 9/11, particularly by the American and British establishments, such as the media, think-tanks and diplomatic circles, as a way of dealing with Islamic extremism in the Middle-East.

Without a doubt, displaying Turkey as a model country for the Middle East is one of the most captivating topics of our times. This “Turkish model” is marketed to the Middle East under the brand name of “Muslim democracy”. The name sounds like a slogan, constructed by the combination of two words, Islam and democracy, to create a new perception which is meant to appeal to the sub-conscience of Middle-Easterners. The phrase “Muslim democracy” rests on the presumption that Islam and democracy go together well. However, the attempt to implement this objective is not benign. In this article I would like to critically assess both the brand name and the model itself – as well as the purpose of these attempts.

Postulate Number One: None of the monotheist religions, including Islam and Christianity, are compatible with democracy. Religions cannot exist without dogmas and dogmas cannot be democratic. Furthermore, expecting a religion to be democratic is unfair to religion itself. In such a case, the reasons for experiencing democratic deficit in a country can first and foremost be blamed on religion itself. If I were one of those neo-Islamists who are running Turkey today, I would harshly protest the use of the word “Islam” in defining the Turkish regime. When Islam is attributed to Turkish democracy, all recent practices such as jailing journalists, limiting press freedom as well as Turkey’s growing democracy deficit would then be identified with Islam. This is not good for the image of Islam.

Postulate Number Two: There cannot be such a thing called “Muslim democracy”. A regime in which a religion constitutes the reference point cannot be called democratic. Democracies are secular by definition and cannot be defined altogether with a religion.

“Muslim democracy” is therefore an oxymoron, just like “Christian democracy”. A religion that gives up its dogmas for the sake of democracy is a religion no more. Besides, a democracy loses its most important qualities when it tries to be

compatible with the rules of religiosity, and therefore cannot be called a democracy anymore. I am sure that the inventors of this fallacy called "Muslim democracy" are aware of the fact that a democracy needs to be neutral to religion. After having said that, I think we can have a closer look at problems with the "Turkish model". My first question is: Why would the inventors of the "Turkish model" not suggest to the Muslim Middle-East a much more developed and complete model such as the ones that American, British, German or other consolidated democracies are based on? They would not do so because they are Christian democracies?

My second question follows: They suggest the "Turkish model" because it is *Bon pour l'Orient* [best for the Orient]? Yes, maybe it is...

My third question extends from an assumption: Let's imagine for a moment a Turkey where all problems concerning freedom of religion are resolved, where the country would be governed by a modern type social-democratic party (which does not exist in Turkey today). Would the editor of *The Economist* then use the term of "Muslim democracy" to define Turkey?

I do not think so. So, I conclude that the editor who put the foolish headline of "A Muslim democracy in action" considers a Turkey run by an ex, neo, moderate or whatsoever Islamist AKP as a better model, which is more compatible with the Middle East.

I sympathize with the political and ideological motives of the editor who tries to sell the model represented by the AKP to Islamic extremists or radical Islamists in the Muslim world. Because being moderate and keen to play the game of parliamentary democracy by respecting its rules is a legitimate and suitable way of change that can be offered to Islamist movements in the region: "Be like AKP, imitate AKP! Take it as a model or an inspirational example."

But, and it is a big "but", without secularism, AKP would have never existed. Despite its all shortcomings, this A secular democracy was the catalyst of AKP. An AKP would not have emerged had there not first been a secular democracy. So the Islamists in the Arab world would need to first adopt a secular democracy, and then take AKP as a model. Are they interested in doing this? A positive answer is hardly in sight. The AKP evolved from a classical Islamist movement to a reformed one by taking the democratic steps of Turkey's secular regime.

AKP is the most "reformed" Islamist party on the planet. It is reformed; and it is therefore neo-Islamist. What this phrase means to me is a party which is not proposing the establishment of Sharia and instead follows a strategy of transforming the Turkish society into a more conservative one in religious terms.

It would be most welcome if the Muslim Middle East appreciated and followed the Turkish secular democracy model which gave birth to AKP. But responses given to a survey that has been conducted in eight countries including Iran last September by Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) indicates almost the opposite.¹ The research, conducted by phone and not through face to face interviews prior to the Arab Spring, covers data obtained from 2267 respondents from Egypt, Iran, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Iraq. It was found that in these countries the average of respondents who see Turkey as a model is 66 percent. But the outcome becomes paradoxical when they are asked “Why have they been favoured Turkey as a model?”

“Turkey cannot and will not be a model to the Middle East by being Middle-Easternized. On the contrary, a Turkey which protects its democratic and secular identity will be a better inspiring example for the region.”

The most preferred reason for appreciating Turkey as a model is its “Muslim identity” (15 percent), then comes its economy (12 percent) which is followed by its democracy (11 percent) and its “advocating the rights of Palestinians and Muslims” (10 percent).

But when it comes to the four most cited reasons by the minority who rejects Turkey to act as their role model, the paradox grows deeper. This time Turkey’s “secular political structure” is seen as a negative aspect of the Turkish model (12 percent). The fact that “Turkey is not Muslim enough” comes second, with a rate of 11 percent. The

third case against Turkey is its relations with the West (10 percent) and the fourth is the assumption that a model is not needed for the region at all (8 percent).

It’s also necessary to add that values of democracy and secularism, which are also the core characteristics that make Turkey different than the countries of its region and allow Turkey to be portrayed as even a preferable model, are supported as the first reason to appreciate “Turkish model” in only two countries: In Lebanon, Turkey’s democratic nature is supported by 12 percent of the respondents and in Iraq its secular structure with equally 12 percent.

¹ “Perceptions of Turkey in the Middle East 2010”, TESEV (Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation), 2 February 2011, http://www.tesev.org.tr/UD_OBJS/PDF/DPT/OD/YYN/OrtadoguENG_II.publication.pdf

As these figures show, in order for Turkey to become a model country in the eyes of the people of the Middle-East, it has to Islamize more, further defend the rights of Palestinians and Muslims against the West (and particularly against Israel), turn away from secularism and distance itself with the West. For Middle Easterners, these elements appear to be more important than democracy in determining Turkey's credibility to serve as a model. That being said, I do not have any objection to Arabs and Iranians being inspired from the Turkish model. What I reject is the Western world marketing the "Turkish model" under the name of a "Muslim democracy".

The first reason for my objection is that it is unethical. Calling Turkey a "Muslim democracy" implicitly attributes a permanent nature to the AKP government. What will the editor call Turkey if the AKP loses the upcoming election or the one after that? Will Turkey cease to be "Muslim"?

Presenting Turkey to the Middle East as a "Muslim democracy" is also a way for the West to provide a clear moral and political boost to the policies of the AKP government in the direction of making Turkey more religiously conservative, which at the end of the day will create an electorate less keen to safeguard secularism. And as I have argued above, secularism, in my view, is essential for democracy. The moral and political support provided by the Western circles may also end up with the Turkish democracy deficit to grow further. Presenting a regime as a model, by definition, means justifying and favoring it, thus stifling the healthy criticism needed to keep Turkey on the right track of reform.

Turkey cannot and will not be a model to the Middle East by being Middle-Easternized. On the contrary, a Turkey which protects its democratic and secular identity will be a better inspiring example for the region.