

ONE CALORIE ISLAM : TURKEY’S “LIGHT MUSLIMS” AND THE WEST

Abstract

The significance of the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) success in the November 2002 elections is a question of great importance. For the West, which has an innate fear of a resurgent Islam, caution must be taken before lumping AKP together with the fundamentalist Islamic movements prevalent in the Muslim world. When dealing with AKP and its leadership, Western governments should take into consideration their own liberal traditions, the history of Islam in the world, and the role of political Islam in Turkish society.

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The elections of November, 2002 that thrust the Justice and Development Party (AKP) into both parliament and power have been hailed as a sea change in Turkish politics. For the first time in its history, Turkey has a party with ostensible Islamic leanings as a non-coalition majority in government.² Aside from the perceived Islamic tendencies of AKP, this is impressive since the last time Turkey had a single party government in power was more than fifteen years ago.³ Some scholars and pundits interpret this event as a trend parallel to that which occurred in post-war Europe with the rise in influence of rightist Christian Democratic parties. Others have indicated that this is an alarming drift to the religious right that should prove worrisome to the world – Europe in particular. Should the fact that a freely and democratically elected party with significant support among the more conservative and religious sectors of Turkish society seems so popular be a worry to the West? Members of the party themselves have responded with a resounding negative to this question. The interim Prime Minister, Abudullah Gül, emphatically stated shortly after the elections that “we are not a religious party. We want to show that a Muslim society can be transparent, democratic and compatible with the modern world.”⁴

Essentially, what the leaders of AKP have been telling the rest of the world is that their brand of Islam is not of the oppressive variety that is often represented in the media and popular opinion, especially in the West, by the fanatical and suicidal maniac or the narrow-minded tyrannical Arab leader. AKP, if it is to be believed, is for all intents and

² APS Diplomat News Service, ‘Turkey Under Islamic Democrats Living with Kemalism; or Kemalists Ousting Them,’ December 2, 2002, vol. 57, iss. 23.

³ Jon Gorvett, ‘Turkey’s new brooms,’ *The Middle East*, December, 2002: 6.

⁴ Owen Matthews, ‘After the Quake,’ *Newsweek International*, November 18, 2002: 24.

purposes simply an Islamic version of West European or American Christian conservatism. As a party, it is clean cut, well dressed, and modern in its approach to politics and governance - more so in fact than many of the rivals it knocked out of power in the elections. In other words - and to paraphrase a popular American marketing slogan - this is not your father's Islam.

Yet the specter of traditional Islam and the provenance of AKP hang heavy over the party and its leadership. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül, the two most visible faces of AKP, have long and close ties to former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan and links to the allegedly more subversive varieties of Turkish political Islam that have existed in the past. Erdoğan's arrest and imprisonment for inciting religious hatred and the fact that both of AKP's senior members' wives wear headscarves are cited as evidence of the religious tendencies of AKP and its leading cadres. The party routinely decries such characterizations, stating that leaders such as Erdoğan and Gül have learned from their past misjudgments and are ready to move forward in an enlightened, democratic, and secular way. AKP leaders have stated that religion is simply a matter of personal choice that informs their political beliefs.⁵

The title of this article makes reference to a popular television comedy series, wherein the main character attempts to live his life in a manly, traditional way in modern Turkish society. He is an avid football fan, does not believe in housework or shopping, and he derides his sensitive and caring friend, the epitome of the modern male, who respects his wife, treats her as an equal and listens to her wishes. The main character has a term for men of his friend's ilk - one calorie men, or light men - those who have strayed from their masculine roots and gone soft in the modern world. To a great extent,

the debate of Islam in Turkish politics, and the role of AKP in the November 2002 elections, very much reflects the above. Under the shadow of traditional Islam, AKP has worked hard to placate both Turks and foreigners alike by offering up a modern, accessible, “soft” alternative to traditional hard line Islam. While elements in the military, and any number of foreign press agencies, indicate that the success of AKP in the elections was a calamitous victory for the forces of Islam, the party membership itself has vociferously denied such depths of Islamic influence or religious ties. Rather they emphasize the secular nature of their party, re-assert their support for the guiding principles of Kemal Atatürk, the Republic’s founding father, and espouse doctrines that reflect ideas conducive to Western liberal democracy. If AKP is to be taken at face value, they are the “light Muslims” that the title suggests.

The most popular term that has been bandied about in both the national and foreign press has been “Muslim-Democrats,” a play on the concept of Christian-Democrats of Western Europe, and of Germany in particular. It has been asked if Germany can have a democratic party with religious roots, why can not Turkey as well? AKP wants to demonstrate to the world that the ideas of Islam and democracy are not inherently incompatible. If political parties in the developed West have been able to incorporate religious foundations into their political agendas then the same should be possible under Islam and in Turkey.

Response by the West

A more important question that arises is how should the West treat this new political phenomenon of Turkey - a secular-based, “light” Muslim party wielding rare

⁵ Matthews: 25.

majority power in a parliament that is often known for its fractious politics? Does the fact that AKP won the elections so handily in November, 2002 indicate that there is a threat of Islamic resurgence in Turkey, akin to that of much of the Middle East since the 1970s, or is it an evolved and moderate form of Islamic influence, much as the West has been hoping would develop given the dearth of critical ideological self-examination that Islam has had over the past centuries. If in Turkey itself there are difficulties in determining the nature of AKP, what then can the West do? How should the liberal democracies of Western Europe and North America treat Erdoğan and AKP – coolly and from distance, or by maintaining the same, close relations as with other Turkish administrations that were secular in nature?

Issues for Consideration

Outside of the political ramifications of the victory of AKP (which were significant given Turkey's history of democracy), there are three fundamental issues that Western countries should give thought to when considering the meaning of AKP's success in electoral politics.⁶ The relationship between secularism and religion in the West, the understanding of Islam in the West, and the lack of knowledge about Islam in Turkish politics all affect how Turkey is perceived in Western political circles.

Secularism and Religion in Theory and Practice. The first issue is one of comparison and perception, essentially an exercise in liberal self-examination. One of the basic

⁶ Given the structure of the electoral system in Turkey and the 10% barrier for parliamentary representation, nearly half of the votes cast in the elections went to parties that failed to gain representation. While not to blame for this condition, the fact that AKP benefited from these limits has significant implications for representation in the Turkish political system. See Gorvett: 8.

principles of liberalism is a secular orientation of the state and its institutions, part of the Enlightenment heritage of Western Europe. However, this does not preclude the existence within secular societies of religious influence on the affairs of state. In the West, it is generally understood that religion and government operate on separate planes. However, in many Western liberal democracies, this is simply not the case and is often problematic for their own societies. In the US, for example, great debates constantly rage in the courts over the placement of the Ten Commandments in schools, the implementation of “moments of silence” for spiritual contemplation and the use of religious iconography on government property. Abortion, premarital sex, and the use of drugs and alcohol are causes that have all been joined by both religious and political elements. In the United Kingdom, there is an official and state sponsored Church, the head of which is also the Head of State, namely the British Crown. In Germany, shops and stores are closed on Sundays in what amounts to a day of enforced rest that has sometimes been attributed to the religious sensibilities of German citizens. In Germany, France and Italy conservative political parties with strong religious leanings are often influential in the determination of both local and national governmental policies.

The question of religion and its role in society and politics is wide and varied within Western societies. From Germany and France, to Italy and Spain, to the UK and the US, religion has been part of serious deliberations that take place in the media, in the schools, and in the halls of government. The debate, to a certain extent, even helps define what liberalism is, as it is exactly this ability to question that is a characteristic of the

liberal heritage.⁷ If the debate of religion is still very much alive in Western societies, why cannot the same such debate take place in a country such as Turkey?

The political philosophy of liberal democracy does an excellent job of establishing an ideal-type state, where the institutions of government are well ordered and rational, and the citizens are responsive and reasonable to the affairs of state. However, as can often be observed, the gap between ideal-type and reality is quite large. In many of the states that lay claim to being liberal democracies sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, gender-bias, and class cleavages all exist.⁸ The same can be said for the impact of religion on the affairs of state. No state, no matter how liberal in its political philosophy, has escaped from the impact of religion on its political system and social structures. If the West is to judge AKP through a prism of liberal democracy, then the West should take its own histories into account.

Already in regions such as the Middle East, there is prevalent an understanding that double standards do exist between what is said by Western liberal states and what is done by them. It behooves Western countries to honestly assess their own positions before offering critiques directed at states such as Turkey. What must be realized by the West is that the presence of a party in Turkey with religious tendencies that won office in open and fair elections could be an apt demonstration that a liberal political ideology is alive, well, and developing, as Western histories have also demonstrated under similar scenarios. It is a function of liberal democracy that a state can accommodate both secular and religious factions.

⁷ Veit Bader, 'Religious Pluralism: Secularism of Priority for Democracy,' in *Political Theory*, Vol. 27, Issue 5, October, 1999: 598-603.

Islam as a Religion. The second issue that the West must take into consideration is a general lack of understanding of Islam by Western societies. For decades if not longer, the West has perceived Islam as a monolithic force that refuses to bend to conventions of modernity, the ideal of states where oppression and submission are the norms of behavior rather than freedom and openness. The word “Islamic” is enough to cause hair to stand on end within Western circles. This has been attributed both to historical experiences, as Islam has been the only force capable of posing as an alternative to the supremacy of Western/Christian civilization, and because, as contemporary encounters (most recently with Al Qaeda) have shown, resentment still exists between the two camps. The West fears Islam because it does not truly understand Islam. What the West sees, as Samuel Huntington (1996) put it, is a Muslim world that “stress[es] the differences between their civilization and Western civilization, the superiority of their culture, and the need to maintain the integrity of that culture against Western onslaught.”⁹

Much of the misunderstanding lies in the fact that the inter-relationship between Islam and the cultures where it is prevalent are so close that those in the West have difficulty in separating the religion from the culture. Contemporary Arab zealots and ideologues have done little to help correct this situation. Too often differences between the Arabic world, for example, and the Western world are defined in terms of religion when there are often more fundamental differences that derive from culture rather than religion. This is not to say, of course, that Islam has not played a great role in the development of many political cultures, but it is important for the West to remember that Islam, as a religion, was, in many places, grafted on to already well defined and

⁸ Bader: 600.

established cultures.¹⁰ Islam is part and parcel of many cultures, but it does not, as is often represented in the West, subsume all other cultural influences in the development of a culture, and of political culture in particular.

Islam and Turkey. The final issue of fundamental concern is a lack of understanding in the West of political Islam in Turkish society and the provenance of AKP itself. Turkey, of course, inherited its Islamic beliefs from the Ottoman Empire, whose leaders had already held Islam as their religion at the founding of the empire. From a cultural perspective, Turkey is Muslim in much the way Italy is Catholic – many citizens profess to be part of the religion although fewer and fewer people actively participate in its religious ceremonies and many fail to follow a number of the strictures of the religion, such as prohibiting drink and requiring prayer.

The history of political Islam in Turkey, however, is a different matter. Unlike Western religions, the political characteristics of the practice of Islam have found more vocal, and often more violent, voices than in Christianity. The rise of political Islam in Turkey dates back to the 1960s and is not, as is commonly thought, to be a characteristic of the global resurgence of fundamentalist Islam in the 1980s and 1990s.¹¹ It has been argued, in fact, that the rise of fundamentalism in Turkey in the 1980s was not so much a grass-roots uprising as it was a response to the policies of the newly installed government

⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996: 213.

¹⁰ Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East: 2000 Years of History from the Rise of Christianity to the Present Day* (London: Phoenix Giant, 1996: 54-65).

¹¹ Mehran Kamrava, 'Pseudo-Democratic Politics and Populist Possibilities: The Rise and Demise of Turkey's Refah Party,' in the *British Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 25, iss. 2, November, 1998: 286-287.

of Kenan Evren and Turgut Özal.¹² If this position is accepted, the role of religion in republican Turkish society then has been one of long held practices that only recently surfaced in a more militant form due to pressures from above.

The most cited example of the increasingly political characteristics of Islam in Turkey has been the rise of the Welfare Party (RP) in the 1980s, and its eventual electoral success at both the local and national levels in 1995 and 1996. Although it first participated in open elections in 1987, RP had roots that extended from the National Order Party in 1969 through various manifestations in the 1970s and 1980s before settling again under Necmettin Erbakan's control in 1983 as RP. Electoral victories in the mid-1990s led to national office and a government that made a swift turn away from Western and secular policies. Eventually banned by the government, the RP's mantle of Islam passed to the Virtue Party (FP), which itself was soon banned, leading to a split in the Islamic camp between a more conservative pro-Erbakan camp and a more liberal pro-Recep Tayyip Erdoğan camp.

Erdoğan earned his Islamic stripes under the long tutelage of Erbakan, but experienced something of an epiphany after his imprisonment in the late 1990s. He professes to follow a secular path and has built a party that reflects this new found secular attitude. As one writer has stated, the choice of Abdullah Gül as interim Prime Minister after AKP's electoral victory was a positive indicator that the party has taken a significant step forward for moderate Islamic voices. Envisioning something of an Islamic version of the Protestant Reformation, this author states that it is the long held moderate views of

¹² Umit Cizre Sakallioğlu, 'Parameters and Strategies of Islam-State Interaction in Republican Turkey,' in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 28, iss. 2, May 1996: 231.

party members such as Erdoğan and Gül that will help move Islam into the moderate and political mainstream and away from fringe elements of the Islamic movement.¹³

As for the AKP leader, assailing Erdoğan for past actions that led to his incarceration would be the same as labeling President George W. Bush of the United States a racist and an anti-Catholic for having once spoken at Bob Jones University. While his roots are deep in the Islamic soil, and his influence on AKP great, Erdoğan must be given a chance to prove himself in the field of Turkish electoral politics. This is not to say that Erdoğan and AKP are in the free and clear. Naturally, given the genealogy of the party, AKP deserves to be watched, but not so closely as to smother any chance of demonstrating its intentions within the structure of Turkey's democratic system.

Conclusion

The short answer to the question of whether or not Turkey's new Islamic influenced political party will have a significant impact on doing business with the West can be answered simply – we can only wait and see. In the limited time that AKP has been in power, they have managed to impress the West with their efforts to maintain the continuity of Turkish foreign policy at the macro-level by re-committing Turkey to its NATO responsibilities, its relationship with Israel, and its endeavors to gain entry into the European Union. Even the slap in the face that the United States felt in early March, 2003, when the Turkish parliament rejected requests to move American forces through Southeastern Turkey to Northern Iraq demonstrates that AKP is fully capable of

¹³ Robert D. Kaplan, 'Reform Party – Can Turkish Islamists save Islam,' The New Republic, December 16, 2002: 13.

responding to popular opinion and using the tools of democracy in such a way as to promote internal stability and cohesion.

Will AKP follow the path of RP into oblivion or will it blaze its own trail of success? In truth, only time will tell. For now, the West has little choice but to take AKP at its word and trust in the spirit of democracy that exists in Turkey. It is too early to dismiss AKP as a group Islamic cronies with a hidden agenda. Understanding Islam and its impact on the state, Turkey's own particular form of Islam, and their own liberal tendencies should be the focus of Western states when considering policies that impact Turkey and the region.

The definitive test of AKP's impact on both Turkey and the West will not be determined until the next round of elections at the earliest. If the disenfranchised parties of Turkey are able to rework their political image, and rebuild their popular bases of support, then it would demonstrate that AKP has been nothing but beneficial for Turkey as it has led to the rejuvenation of Turkish electoral politics. Likewise, a demonstration that outcast parties can learn from AKP success and fight back within the realm of the Turkish political structure will demonstrate to the West, and in particular European naysayers, that liberal, representative democracy is firmly ensconced in the psyche of the Turkish electorate.

The fact is that the ultimate intentions of AKP are unknown. Yet it would be unacceptable for us to pass judgment prematurely in this liberal democratic state. In truth, the leaders of AKP must be given enough rope to hang themselves if their intentions are less than democratic, as has been suggested from a number of quarters. However, the West must let this drama play out in its own way and in its own time

without any external interference if Turkey is to benefit from the experience. Western states must treat AKP as honest brokers if they intend to support liberal democracy in Turkey. It is nothing less than they would expect from any other liberal country.

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