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Between Islamists and Kemalists

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Islamist forces have moderated widely throughout the Middle East, but this has not been accompanied by parallel democratization. Turkey appears as an exception to this, as the transformation of Islamic actors and the secular Turkish state have been concurrent processes. As I have argued elsewhere, decades of unproductive confrontation within the confines of a democracy have taught both Islamic actors and the state the value and skills of “engagement,” a skill that most other social actors such as the secular left have failed to acquire in Turkey. Engagement is an umbrella term referring to a long continuum of non-confrontational interaction with the state ranging from contestation and negotiation to cooperation and alliance between Islamic actors and various branches of state. Most importantly, engagements have contributed to democratization by transforming both Islamic actors and the authoritatively secular state.¹

By Islamic actors, I refer to AKP (Justice and Development Party) in government as well as the large and internationally active Gülen movement. They share a non-defiant positioning towards the authoritatively secular state. Unlike their forefathers Refah (Welfare) and the Nur movement, AKP and Gülen have successfully negotiated the boundaries between religion and politics to make more space for faith-based lives under secular conditions. Importantly, these multi-dimensional negotiations led these Islamic actors to separate religion from other spheres of life, such as education and political authority. Put differently, Islamic actors in Turkey are no longer contesting over either Islamic or secular state, but mainly over ways of life that are religiously conservative or liberal.

Although a large variety of actors negotiate the terms of democracy in Turkey, this has been obscured mainly by two misconceptions. First, Islamic actors have been mistakenly praised as “liberal democrats” as they have come to the forefront of political reform. Second, the symbiotic association of the Kemalist elite, the secularist followers of Atatürk, with the Turkish state must be revisited as the Turkish state is being transformed against the Kemalists’ will.

State transformation

Since AKP first came to power in 2002, it has developed constructive relations with several branches of the state, including even the military, the staunchest safeguard of laicism, the constitutional principle amounting to state control of religion. The reform packages included the reduction of military control over politics through institutional changes in the National Council of Security (MGK). During the first years of its rule, AKP conducted both economic and political reforms, including the amendment of the penal code, the expansion of rights of ethnic minorities and women, as well as decreasing inflation and increasing economic growth. Although the momentum of reforms has slowed down, the government is currently working on amending the constitution.

In addition to political reforms, AKP’s pro-free-market attitudes have precipitated the rise of an Islamic bourgeoisie. A considerable amount of wealth is accumulated in the hands of Islamic actors, who mostly own small and medium size businesses. Subsequently, the Islamic actors who were previously associated with lower socio-economic status became competitive with Turkey’s traditionally secular economic elite. The integration of Turkish Islamic actors into the domestic and global markets further empowered them vis-à-vis the state by facilitating their engagement with it without losing their autonomy.

The transition is not finalized. In April 2007 the Turkish military gave a “warning” to AKP upon its nomination of Abdullah Gül, the former Min-

In the political developments in Turkey over the last months all attention has gone to the Islamists and Kemalists. The struggle between those two seems to have overshadowed the concerns of many ordinary Turkish citizens. Nevertheless, people who sympathized with neither of the two sides were instrumental in putting up an opposition movement against the AKP government. It remains a question whether they can bring about further democratization in Turkey.

ister of Foreign Affairs, for presidency. Terrified by the idea of the first devout president on the secular Turkish Republic, the collusion between the military and the constitutional court postponed the presidential elections. A secularist outburst followed expressing doubts about the limits and even the “necessity” of democracy. These worries are rather unsubstantiated because these contestations between Islamic actors and secular state are strong indicators

of the transition from authoritarian rule. As Sheri Berman reminds us, democratization has never been a smooth sail, but simply a bloody business.² The most praised Western democracies emerged out of a long-term struggle among and between various social forces and authoritarian regimes.

Despite the collusion between the military and the constitutional court, AKP won the parliamentary elections for the second time in July 2007 by forty seven percent vote—up from thirty three percent in 2002. The results of the election were particularly unwelcome for the military and the Kemalist elite and the secularist opposition party, Republican People’s Party (CHP). In the past, democrats from the secular left had found refuge under CHP’s roof. However, as the secularist politics of CHP have become increasingly anti-democratic and pro-military, and alienated the democratic left, it has become a home for hardcore Kemalists only.

The Kemalist-led backlash

The controversy surrounding the presidential nomination of Abdullah Gül incited a vocal secularist backlash. Kemalists, mostly women, who played pioneer roles in Kemalist civil society organizations, led this backlash in the three largest cities, Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara.³ Although exceptions apply, the Kemalist elite typically comes mostly from privileged family and socio-economic background, holds leadership positions in state or society, and is above the age of sixty. Under the Kemalist leadership, hundreds of thousands of people (1.5 million estimated in Izmir only) poured to the streets opposing a wide variety of issues including the rapid rise of AKP’s popularity and power.

In my interviews, Kemalist leaders made radical statements expressing alienation from the idea of democracy, such as: “We do not want democracy anymore, as it is used and abused by the Islamists.” Today’s Kemalists, unlike their hero Atatürk, are more and more estranged from the West, as the EU largely supports AKP’s reform packages. One of the leaders of the protests stated: “The West and the EU do not understand the sacred meaning of the military for the Turkish society. In our country, there is no difference between an NGO and the military, each of which come to rescue us from political or natural disasters such as Sharia or earthquake.” A considerable majority of Kemalists supports the military’s domination in politics. Despite the vocal secularist backlash, not only did Gül become the president in a few months, but also the backlash faded immediately after the parliamentary elections.

Why did the backlash lose its remarkable momentum? Typical of social outbursts, the secularist backlash exploded as an abrupt and emotionally charged response to events. This emotional energy is not enough to constitute a durable social movement that can engage with the state. More importantly, the symbiotic relationship between the Kemalist elite and the secular state has prevented the former from growing as a social group with agendas that are separate from the Republic. Differently put, the Kemalists’ claim of a monopoly of the Republic has undermined their own autonomy as independent social actors. Ironically, although Kemalists claimed to be the guardians

of secular democracy, they lack the basic experience of citizenry to negotiate with the state and to push for their own agendas by using democratic channels. Whether they are state officials or members of civil society, Kemalists of the new millennium need to come to terms with the separate and autonomous sphere of the state and society. This is the first step toward the politics of engagement that the Islamic actors in Turkey have mastered.

Ordinary citizens

If the Kemalists do not adjust themselves to the requirements of participating in a more liberal democracy, they are likely to become an impediment to shifting relations between the state and ordinary secular citizens. The majority of Turkish citizens do not associate with either Kemalist or Islamic actors. Hence, they do not mobilize or organize collectively with any of these groups. Their refusal to base their lives on faith and religious conservatism separates them from Islamic actors. Although they are discontent with political Islam, they also do not ally with Kemalists and their authoritarian laicism. Both of these polarized groups fall short of satisfying different needs of secular Turkish citizens for individual freedoms.

The worst impact of the inefficient outbursts of the Kemalist elite is the fact that they overshadow the voice and presence of a diverse and popular secular resistance to political Islam. Unlike the Kemalist leadership and spokespeople, secular crowds in the 2007 protests crosscut the lines of class, social status, gender, age, occupation, and even political orientation. The rich, the middle class, and the poor walked together to protest AKP. Unlike the old-school Kemalist elite, the participating secular people were from every age group, including the youth. Most importantly, this was the first public demonstration in which a large spectrum of the secular and the faithful—including some Muslims with headscarf—joined forces against political Islam. Considering the close ties between the pious president Gül and the AKP government, the secular masses expressed fear of losing the separation of powers between government, presidency, and parliament. Briefly, the protestors exercised “democracy in everyday life,” while the Kemalist leadership explicitly denounced democratic reforms under an Islamic party’s leadership.

Democratic outcomes require fair and genuine competition, but there seems to be none for AKP at the moment. In an informal dinner party in Istanbul, I had the chance to meet and chat with Abdullah Gül. I was very surprised to see how calm and confident he remained in the middle of the turbulence, which was mainly about his presidency. He told me: “The reform process has started. We will not be stopped.” Gül’s serenity was largely due to the inefficient opposition politics by Kemalists and CHP.

AKP and liberal democrats

The successive victories of AKP have come with increasing religious conservatism in everyday life as a package deal. As many restaurants stopped serving alcohol, secular Turks from every walk of life stood up for their rights to consume alcohol wherever they wish. Not just the Kemalists but secular groups at large express discomfort by the rise of religious conservatism in daily life. Especially at the neighbourhood level, the tensions between religious conservatism and the needs of the secular citizens increase rapidly. In certain neighbourhoods and cities, women who are dressed revealingly complain increasingly about judgmental looks. More and more people express discomfort about being refused to be served food during Ramadan and being judged by the pious when they eat in public. Pious leaders, such as Gül, do serve alcohol both in private and official events to display their cooperation and compromise. However, democratic ends cannot be trusted to the goodwill of political leaders.

The fact that Islamic actors in Turkey undertake political reform does not render them “liberal democrats.” The term must be strictly reserved for social actors who unconditionally defend the rights and freedom of others and not just themselves. Probably aware of this distinction, AKP recruited a considerable number of genuine democrats who were previously active in the secular left. It is also significant that the Socialist International has approached AKP, but not CHP, for membership. The reason that democrats temporarily cooperate with AKP is that it is the only party that undertakes political reform in Turkey. But it would be a clear oddity to assign the role of a liberal democrat to Islamic actors, who tried to criminalize adultery, and who do not even claim to be liberal outside the economic realm.

In contrast to the liberal democrats, AKP yearns for democratization mainly because a more democratic state will emancipate and empower Islamic actors by tolerating their own faith-based life. Similar to the founding fathers’ reforms as part of their broader state-building project, AKP’s reforms are supplementary parts of their broader scheme of political reform. For example, AKP passes bills of reform for women and ethnic and religious minorities. But its attitudes in general contradict with these bills, as the party has undermined the Islamic feminism that had flourished under the previous Islamic party, Refah. Instead, AKP recruited conservative women into the party, who do not account to the women’s movement but to the Prime Minister Erdoğan. This paradox has also been evident in AKP’s ambiguous relations with religious minorities, such as the alienated Alevites or AKP’s absence in the mourning of Hrant Dink, the Armenian democrat assassinated due to his liberal politics.

While liberal democrats support AKP for respect of individual and religious freedoms, Islamic actors have conservative takes on ways of life, sex, homosexuality, and gender relations. A strong opposition to

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the highly skilled AKP mobilization has to be assertive about individual freedoms. The lift of the headscarf ban from the universities in 2008 can serve as the first step for a liberal democracy only if the freedoms of others, such as religious minorities are institutionally protected. Rather than attacking the pious and their faith-based life, an efficient secular opposition needs to recognize, respect, and contest with Islamic actors over individual freedoms by using democratic channels. However, unlike Islamic actors, ordinary secular citizens have not yet articulated their future agendas, discontents, needs and interests. The lack of a political language of ordinary citizens explains why some vote for AKP, and others borrow selectively from Kemalist laicism. Yet, this is simply an act of laziness on their part. One thing is clear. Neither CHP nor the Kemalist elite can lead or shelter a lasting and proactive (as opposed to reactionary) secular resistance movement. The secular crowds need to come up with new recipes if they wish to surpass the old-style Kemalist menu that is losing its appeal along with democratization in Turkey.

Protest against presidential candidate Abdullah Gül, Istanbul

Notes

1. Berna Turam, *Between Islam and the State: The Politics of Engagement* (Stanford University Press, 2007).
2. Sheri Berman, “How Democracies Emerge: Lessons from Europe,” *Journal of Democracy* 18, no.1 (2007).
3. Berna Turam, “Turkish Women Divided by Politics: Secularist Activism versus Islamic Non-resistance,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* (Fall 2008, forthcoming).

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