

# The Validity of Analysis on Democratic Islam in Turkey

Predicting the effect of the rise of the

Freedom and Justice Party on democratic institutions in Turkey

Even if Islamist parties take moderate positions while fighting for a legitimate political role, nobody can be sure how they would act if they gained power.

~ Brown, Hamzawy and Ottaway

## **INTRODUCTION**

Turkey, because of its geographic location as the cross-road between Europe and the Middle East, has long been a player in regional politics. However, Turkey has recently shown an increasing willingness to broaden its reach and exert influence in international foreign policy, occasionally to the chagrin of the United States despite being a long-time political ally of the United States. Turkey has been pro-West since the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the secular state under its first President, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. This stance is seen in its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and in its seeking entry into the European Union (EU). As a Muslim-majority nation, Turkey has struggled to balance its Islamic identity with its secular identity and democratic institutions, a struggle that has resulted in four major military interventions since 1960 – including three coups – as the military that sees itself as the protectors of the secular state has suppressed pro-Islamic political elements. Following the last military coup in 1980, and a brief period of military rule, civilian governments controlled Turkey and in 1995 a pro-Islamic Prime Minister was appointed for the first time following the electoral victory of the Welfare (Refah) Party (Dagi, Transformation of Islamic Political Identity in Turkey: Rethinking the West and Westernization 2005). As has happened in the past, this Islamic rise resulted in a military intervention in 1997 when the Welfare Party was ousted from the democratically elected coalition government (Cornell, Kaya and Cornell 2002). The government of Turkey was mostly ineffective following this intervention and was rocked by a series of serious economic crises. General public discontent with government ineffectiveness and the crumbling economy is credited with allowing the newly formed Freedom and Justice Party (AKP) to come to power in November 2002 as the first majority controlling pro-Islamic

conservative government in Turkey (S. E. Cornell 2009). Pro-Islamic nature aside, it was the first political party to have full control over Parliament in Turkey in the past 50 years (Idiz 2003).

## **PROBLEMS WITH ANALYSIS**

This clear shift to an overtly religious conservative government, and one that enjoyed full control over Parliament, was a possible problem for the United States and Europe. The political changes were noted in the West and concerns were raised about the effect that the rise of an Islamic government would have on Turkish/Western relations and the problems those effects would create for the United States. The primary fear of the rise of the AKP was that the party would conduct an Islamic take-over of secular Turkey to the detriment of democracy and would create a resulting shift in foreign policy away from the West and towards Islamic and Arab countries (Idiz 2003).

Domestic views are affected by availability bias as they focus on easily understood and sensational acts that are used to drive fear of an Islamic government such as headscarves (Idiz 2003) or the introduction of taxes to legislate away the consumption of alcohol (Adnkronos International n.d.). Expectancy bias also plays a role in simplistic examples such as compulsory religious education. AKP critics cite compulsory religious education as an issue (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2011) and fail to remember that the military – while characterized as being completely secular – also introduced compulsory religious education after the 1980 coup (Yavuz 1997). Much of the international focus on the AKP was on statements and promises made by AKP leadership – particularly promises that changes in legislation are in the interest of democracy as they work towards membership in the EU – and on assessing the personalities and motivations of the highest profile AKP leaders.

Western acceptance of those statements is obvious – and an obvious problem. The acceptance that legislative changes would be democratically beneficial has been influenced by the desires and biases of the listeners. Rather than identifying how those changes may have an overall positive or negative effect on democratic institutions in Turkey, the changes were simply noted as “remarkable” and quickly embraced by organizations such as the European Commission who identified that “Turkey has made further impressive legislative efforts which constitute significant progress” towards meeting Western legislative norms (Zalewski 2004). Change – without proof of direction – was seen as forward progress.

## **HEALTH OF DEMOCRACY**

The continued military intervention in democratically elected governments is seen as a hindrance to the growth of democracy in Turkey according to Western analysts. The military has been identified as “a major factor hindering the democratic development” in Turkey (Cornell, Kaya and Cornell 2002). The lack of democratic growth in Turkey has been placed squarely on the shoulders of the military “largely because of the stultifying effect of continued military meddling in political issues” although structural factors such as “state intolerance of criticism have made democratic progress difficult” (Haynes 2003).

Following a military coup in 1980, the military briefly held power in Turkey for a period of three years before returning control to a civilian government. From 1986 through 1992 Turkey enjoyed an average score of 3.0 – on a decreasing scale from 1.0 to 7.0 – indicating an electoral democracy that enjoyed freedoms similar to those found in the Philippines and well ahead of the Soviet Union (Diamond 1997). This score was granted despite incidents of torture by security

personnel and a state of emergency that had been in existence since 1987 in ten southeastern provinces where terrorist violence resulted in the restriction of freedom of the press and other civil rights (U.S. Department of State 1994). In 1993, Turkey's score dropped to 4.0 and was lowered again for 1994 and 1995 to 5.0, the lowest score among non-established democracies with the exception of the failed democracy of Nigeria (Diamond 1997). This reduction coincided with a change in tactics to urban warfare by the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) that resulted in unprecedented levels of violence (U.S. Department of State 1994).

Throughout the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Turkey continued to be ranked as only partially free in terms of democratic institutions. Progress on political and legal reforms required for democracy and to ensure the rule of law was identified as unsteady in 2002 (Freedom House 2002) and seriously regressed after 2006 following the revision of counter-terrorism laws that have been used to suppress free speech and violate the rights of journalists (Freedom House 2011) and to suppress minorities and legal protections (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2011). As of 2010, Turkey was at a historic low in terms of freedom of the press and ranked 138<sup>th</sup> out of 178 countries as the government used lawsuits, incarceration without charge and court convictions to target journalists (Reporters Without Borders 2010).

The 2006 revisions are seen as a major shift in the policy of the AKP as it used the September 11, 2001 attacks against the United States as an excuse to strengthen its anti-terrorism laws. Following these revisions, the AKP began ruthlessly suppressing dissidents as shown by an increase in terrorism convictions from 273 in 2005 to 6,345 in 2009 and Turkey alone is responsible for 12,897 terrorism convictions – one third of all terror convictions globally since September 11 (Mendoza 2011). The increase in convictions cannot be attributed to an increase in terrorism attacks because although PKK attacks have continued, the level of violence is nowhere

near the levels seen between 1984 and 1999 when the Kurdish insurgency resulted in the deaths of 30,000 people (Migdalovitz 2002).

## **THE ROLE OF COGNITION**

Despite indicators that democracy has not progressed in Turkey under the legislative changes undertaken by AKP, the West continues to applaud legislative changes that will ostensibly increase freedoms and democratic structures in Turkey. In 2002 there wasn't a previous example of democracy in a Muslim majority nation; the route that Turkey would take under the AKP had no historical precedent since Turkey was the only Islamic democracy at that time (Guirguis 2005). This lack of a precedent meant that the availability heuristic, an important shortcut in information processing, was unavailable. The same cannot be said post-2006 when there was ample evidence that legislative changes had led to the consolidation of power rather than increasing freedoms.

One explanation might be the cognitive theory of "Imaginability" (Cottam, et al. 2010) because it was hard to visualize an Islamic Turkey after decades of secular government going back to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. The "availability of instances" (Cottam, et al. 2010) may also have been a factor with the AKP leadership offering clear public guarantees of progress and democracy and moderate Islam while offering few instances of Islamic or anti-Western rhetoric. Indeed, the AKP "has been very careful not to make any statements raising tensions with the secular establishment" (Cornell, Kaya and Cornell 2002) and their rhetoric identifies support for Western ideals of democracy and human rights and backs EU membership (Migdalovitz 2002). This has resulted in AKP

leadership figures like Abdullah Gul being identified as moderates based on their “conciliatory positions” (Abramowitz 2007).

The United States “seeks a stable, friendly government” that is democratic in character in order to advance an array of U.S. interests and to “refute predictions of an imminent” conflict between Islam and the West (Migdalovitz 2002). This need appears to have resulted in bolstering of the view that Turkey was improving and that the AKP party was going to strengthen democratic institutions. Despite a decline in Freedom House rankings of democratic indicators and despite a European Commission report that identified continued human rights abuses including widespread torture and the recent arrest of 80 journalists (Freedom House 2002), a report from the Congressional Research Service found that “the human rights situation has improved” even while noting that the State Department also reported an excessive use of force and widespread torture (Migdalovitz 2002). Supporters of Turkey as a model Muslim democracy claim that the AKP “has not significantly changed the nature of the secular state at all” and that concerns over the introduction of Islam into daily life are exaggerated (Abramowitz 2007). This assessment is indicative of confirmation bias because it ignores the changes to legislation that have been used to suppress free speech and freedom of expression.

When processing information, categorization is used to simplify complex situations. In the case of Turkey this meant actions taken by the AKP were placed into one of two categories: actions that increased the role of Islam in government or actions that increased democratic freedoms. Early analysis failed to take into account a third category: actions that consolidated the power of the AKP. The consolidation of power by the AKP was evident in 2007 when a member of the AKP – Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul – was nominated to be the President of Turkey. With the AKP already in control of the Prime Ministry and the Parliament, control of the

Presidency would destroy any balance of power that existed and give the AKP additional control over traditionally secular bureaucracies such as the military, judiciary, and education (Migdalovitz 2007). The AKP was also in control of the Interior Ministry (Migdalovitz 2008) – and by extension the police – which was suspected by the military of being “riddled with political appointees and Islamic sympathizers” since the election of the AKP (Cristiani 2008), of the Turkish national intelligence organization (Oren 2010), and had passed a national referendum giving the AKP even greater control over the judiciary and military as it strengthened its position prior to July 2011 elections (STRATFOR 2010).

## **ANALYTICAL TOOLS**

The focus on the effect of Islam on democracy in Turkey failed to allow for AKP actions to be categorized outside of that binary debate. A third category – consolidation of power – did not receive consideration until 2007, possibly because a key assumption was left unchallenged. The leadership of the AKP was underestimated and described as “inexperienced” politicians who were “getting intense on-the-job training” (Idiz 2003). Some analysts discounted the effect of the charismatic former mayor of Istanbul, Recep Erdogan, because he “cannot be a member of parliament”, “will not be able to become Prime Minister” and “will not appear as leader of the [AKP]” because of a 1997 conviction for inciting hatred (Cornell, Kaya and Cornell 2002). This situation changed in 2002 when the AKP introduced legislation that would enable Erdogan to run in future elections (STRATFOR 2002). Having seen political parties banned, and having themselves been banned from engaging in politics, the AKP has taken steps to ensure that this cannot happen again. Failing to challenge these key assumptions meant that the AKP working to consolidate its power was not considered. Had these key assumptions been questioned, the extensive experience of AKP leadership identified and the possibility that Erdogan and others

would eventually be able to participate in politics, the actions of the AKP may have been better identified as a weakening of traditional secular power structures as a means of consolidating their own power, irrespective of Islamic goals, rather than a means of strengthening democracy.

Another key assumption was that Turkey's desire to join the EU was an indication that the AKP was trending towards democracy. This assumption was bolstered by statements from Abdullah Gul, a leading AKP figure, who noted that "without integration into Europe, democratic standards of human rights cannot be achieved" in Turkey (Zalewski 2004). It was believed that EU membership requirements would result in stronger democratic governance, rule of law, and respect for human rights in Turkey (Meral and Paris 2010). It was not acknowledged that only an external force such as the EU could weaken the secular state – and its military protector – and allow the consolidation of power by the AKP (S. E. Cornell 2009). Recently, the AKP has slowed down its EU membership activities (Meral and Paris 2010) although it still claims that it wants to join the EU (Friedman 2010).

The analysis of Turkey would also have benefited from a Quality of Information check, another key analytical technique. Although many of its members had been in politics in Turkey for many years, the AKP was newly formed and had existed for less than two years at the time it assumed power in Turkey. A Quality of Information check would have identified that little information on its policies existed and that there was no historical data on how the AKP engaged with the other political parties in Turkey. This lack of information possibly led to an over-reliance on simple statements by party leadership and public election promises. A review of the statements of AKP leadership would have identified inconsistent statements that indicated possible deception. For example, an AKP deputy chairman stated that the AKP "aspires to rule the state" (S. E. Cornell 2009) in an apparent reference to consolidating power rather than

relying on a series of checks and balances. Erdogan had a history of reneging on earlier promises as noted by his shift from discussing a “flexible” approach towards Cyprus only to take a much more hardline stance after winning elections that installed him as Prime Minister (Idiz 2003). Assessing that the AKP was fully engaged in promoting democracy to levels consistent with EU desires ignored statements from Erdogan that democracy was just a streetcar where “when you come to your stop, you get off” (S. E. Cornell 2009) and that democracy was “a means to an end” (Idiz 2003).

Given the conflicting analysis on the effect of the rise of the AKP on democracy – with most arguing that the AKP would not implement religion in politics and would favor democracy, while fewer argued that the AKP had a “hidden agenda” that was secretly aimed at transforming the political system and moving away from its traditional Western orientation (Idiz 2003) – a Team A/Team B approach would have been beneficial to analysis especially when combined with an Indicators of Change analytical technique . Each team could present its arguments and analysis while judging their results based on democratic indicators such as an increase in journalists arrests – indicating a lack of freedom of the press – an increase in counter-terrorism arrests that is not supported by an increase in terrorist attacks – indicating a lack of freedom of speech. Other indicators, such as the judicial ruling that the AKP had become “a focal point for anti-secular activities” because of its “desire to respond to and change society according to its underlying religious principles” (Migdalovitz 2008), could also have been identified.

## **CONCLUSION**

The basic indicators of a free democracy – freedom of the press, freedom of speech, an independent judiciary and the rule of law – continue to be weak despite AKP-implemented

legislation that was to increase democratic institutions. These democratic institutions also declined despite the reduced role of the military in government, a claimed major factor holding back democracy in Turkey. Despite hope for a balance between Islam and Democracy in Turkey, democratic institutions in Turkey have become more fragile under the rule of the pro-Islamic AKP. Early hope for democracy during AKP's first term was derailed following legislative changes in 2006 and the AKP capturing the presidency in 2007 and "the AKP's second term has been very different from its first, characterized by backtracking in a number of areas" (S. E. Cornell 2009). The AKP has consolidated its power and has politicized the judiciary to serve its interests, oppressed the media, retreated from its moderate image and democratic ideals, and has increasingly turned into a semi-authoritarian government (S. E. Cornell 2009).

Understanding the effect of a pro-Islamic government on democratic institutions in Turkey can provide insight into the possible future course of democracy in countries such as Egypt, Libya and Tunisia whose ruling governments have been overthrown as a result of the Arab Spring. Governments are under pressure to produce the concrete changes desired by the people they govern and governments in Islamic countries are no exception. Only "when Islamists are totally shut out of legitimate political participation – or, conversely, when they achieve total domination (as in Iran)" do they avoid the pressure to produce positive change for the people (Brown, Hamzawy and Ottaway 2006). The military in Turkey attempted the former and failed, but any Islamic Democracy must ensure robust checks and balances to avoid total domination of a single party, religion or viewpoint.

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