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**Commentary**

**Turkey, Islamic Politics and the ‘Turkish Model’**

Mehmet Ozkan

In more than three decades, ever since the Islamic-oriented National Order Party was formed in 1969, Turkish politics has been analysed by many in terms of two straitjacketed views: Islamists trying to capture power on the one hand, and on the other hand the secularists or the state elite, with the help of the military, struggling to keep the country’s political orientation towards the West to protect Turkey as a secular state. This image of Turkey has created some confusion among strategic analysts abroad in understanding Turkey and its policies.

An Islamist-versus-secularist understanding of Turkey gained currency when the Refah Party entered parliament as the largest party, after receiving more than 21 per cent of the votes in the 1995 general election. After becoming a coalition partner in 1996–1997 with the True Path Party with Refah leader Necmettin Erbakan as prime minister, even Turkish political analysts joined the debate on Islamists versus secularists at the domestic level. Although Erbakan was ousted from power in 1997, such debates continued to circulate in academic and political circles.

With the coming to power in 2002 of the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP), or the Justice and Development Party, a split-away group from the Islamist Refah Party, with an absolute majority in the parliament, domestic discussions have focused on two issues. Firstly, how Turkey can move closer to the Islamic world, and what the future holds for secularism in the country; and secondly, whether Turkey can be considered a model for the Middle Eastern countries, given its secular and democratic tradition despite the success of Islamic parties in recent elections. It has to be admitted that AKP’s coming to power has set in motion a mild transition process that could have radical consequences.<sup>1</sup>

This commentary argues that the analysis of Turkish politics as a clash between Islamists and secularists is deeply flawed. Such an approach is neither helpful to understand Turkey fully nor advances the debate when it comes to projecting Turkey as a model for other Muslim countries in the neighbourhood. In Turkey, the main clash has always been between the centre and the periphery, rather than between Islamist and secularist forces, who happen to represent the periphery and the centre, respectively. Turkey needs to be analysed from the centre–periphery perspective and the Turkish model should be looked at from the perspective of the process of reconciliation between the two groups.

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### Defining the centre and the periphery in Turkey

It is understandable that a certain degree of cultural difference and distance might exist between the elite (centre) and masses (periphery) in all societies due to historical, economic and political reasons. However, such distance between the secularist elite and the masses has been particularly wide in the republican era in Turkey.<sup>2</sup> From the outset, the founders of the Turkish Republic were unable and often unwilling to establish effective channels of communication with the periphery. They were remembered only when votes were needed, during which time the centre used 'traditional and religious symbols' to win the hearts and minds of the masses.<sup>3</sup> Such a strategy was temporary and never able to establish a solid link between the two or create an ideology of 'the popular mind'.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to keep in mind that the cultural distance between the 'centre' and the 'periphery' was an important polarity even during the Ottoman period in political and economic life.<sup>5</sup> The centre comprised the civil, military and religious bureaucracy representing the state apparatus with the Sultan at the top, while the periphery included the local notables, peasantry and ordinary people. However, in order to fully grasp the change within Republican Turkey, one needs to remember the state–society relations during the Ottoman period. From time to time, despite the tension between official and popular Islam, the Islamic nature of the political regime was crucial in providing legitimacy to the centre in the eyes of the people. At that time, Islam provided a common understanding, approach and a cultural bridge between the Ottoman elite and society at large.<sup>6</sup> When it comes to the Republican era, there existed a new configuration of social actors and the modernist-secular centre became increasingly resentful of religiosity and Islam, and excluded Islamic elements from social life, at first gradually and later completely.<sup>7</sup>

### The 1990s: Islamists as the 'centre' of the periphery

Due to the economic liberalisation process in Turkey after the 1980s, there has been a large-scale transformation in the periphery. As the periphery gained more economic independence and freedom, it proved its relevance/importance in Turkish politics by electing *rigid* and seemingly ideologically contradictory political parties to power, especially after the death of Turgut Ozal in 1993.<sup>8</sup> From economic organisations such as the Independent Industrial and Businessmen Association (MUSIAD)<sup>9</sup> to youth organisations and non-governmental organisations, the periphery started to organise itself more powerfully and wanted to be heard. Starting slowly in the 1980s, after the 1990s the process started to bear fruit within the intellectual, political and economic spheres which helped the gains had doubled. With the help and experience of the 1980s generation, the process seemed to be accelerated; the number of people benefitting from this process was increasing. This led to the elite reacting instinctively due to fear and anxiety about losing their hegemonic position.<sup>10</sup>

Against this backdrop, the centre initiated counter-measures to stall the onward progress of the masses to capture power at the centre. The so-called bloodless coup of 28 February 1997, which ousted the Welfare Party from power, and its aftermath clearly demonstrated such moves. The barring from university of girls wearing headscarves, shutting down the Imam Hatip High Schools by limiting their chances in the university entrance exams to pursue their studies, and barring the Welfare Party and its successor, the Fazilet (Felicity) Party—all these were intended to serve one purpose: to prevent or slow down the process of democracy, not to prevent the Islamists from

taking over the country, as was made out. In such a politically chaotic environment, the election of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) to parliament in the 1999 election, as the second largest party, was no surprise. Turkish society was searching for ways to channel its voice of anger and the feeling of alienation, and the MHP was the net gainer. Until the major economic crisis in 2000 and 2001, people in Turkey were still optimistic about their future. However, after the economic crisis, which drained such hopes, the situation led people to look for new and better alternatives in politics for the 2002 general elections.

### **Turkey's AKP in domestic and regional context: a model for others?**

The result of the November 2002 election in Turkey should be seen as a turning point in the Turkish political order.<sup>11</sup> If the rise of the Islamist Refah Party in the 1990s is seen as one of the most interesting phenomena in Turkish politics, an equally important and noteworthy development has been the consolidation of the AKP as a political force.<sup>12</sup> The election to parliament of the AKP as a representative of the excluded masses with an absolute majority in 2002 and the subsequent elections and its fast-tracking of Turkey's integration with the EU—whether it was influenced by external or domestic imperatives or both—had created the conditions for the resolution of a longstanding centre–periphery conflict in Turkey. In other words, the AKP had unwittingly undertaken the mission to complete or bring to maturity Turkey's modernisation process with the extension of democracy. The end of the centre–periphery cul-de-sac by popular selection of a conservative party, the AKP, and not by the traditional westernised parties like the Republican Party (CHP), can be interpreted as the culmination of the modernisation/westernisation process in Turkey.<sup>13</sup>

It is commonly argued that the success or failure of the AKP experience in Turkey is likely to have repercussions beyond Turkey's borders and across the entire Islamic world.<sup>14</sup> In contemporary literature, many analysts consider the so-called 'secular Turkey' as 'the bright and shining model for democratic development across the Islamic world'.<sup>15</sup> However, it is not clear what kind of model Turkey can offer to the Middle East or to the Islamic world. Similarly, as democratisation is becoming a reality in Turkey with its overwhelmingly Muslim population, the answer to the question 'What does this development have to do with the Islamic world in practical terms?' is not clear. If this is not understood within the context of the social dimensions/structure of the Middle Eastern states, then it is futile to discuss the development of 'Muslim democracy' in Turkey and its applicability to other countries in the region.

Today, in all non-democratic countries in general and in the Middle East in particular, there exists an alienated and excluded population that has almost no voice or influence in the decision-making process, although the revolutions in the Arab world since 2011 are likely to change this scenario in the longer term. Such groups usually resort to violence as the only way to express themselves, and sometimes come to the surface as Islamists, Leftists (or Socialists) or in other ideological forms depending on the prevalent ideologies of the time. If Turkey today, with the AKP's coming to power, has consolidated or partly settled its centre–periphery relations without civil war, therein lies the 'Turkish model' for the Middle East and possibly even for the third world. Most of the problems in the Middle East emanate from home rather than from outside. Naturally, the starting point should be to usher in democracy, peace and prosperity. Democratic consolidation in Turkey has much to offer to the Middle East, where the problems between the centre and the periphery are acute. With the AKP

consolidating its position in Turkey, the new Turkey can be a much better model for the region and beyond.<sup>16</sup>

One important lesson for the Middle East to be learnt from Turkey's experience is that Turkey could resolve its centre-periphery differences only because of the presence of relatively independent state institutions that allowed the periphery to be a part of the system. In Turkey there was absolute control of the state institutions by the centre until the 1950s, which automatically excluded the periphery. After the 1950s, day-to-day control of Turkey's state institutions slowly moved away from the centre (although the centre still retained supervisory control). Institutions strengthening the democratic process were allowed to grow. This is what kindled the hope among the Islamists—who would otherwise continue their radical politics—that one day they could take over the reins of power in the country. Currently, in the Middle East, there is no such institutional structure that allows the periphery to have a 'voice', nor is there an alternative to violence. State institutions are under the absolute control of autocratic regimes, which are similar to the pre-1950 conditions of Turkey. Following the Turkish example, first an 'opening up' of institutions should be allowed, then a gradual push towards more accommodative centre-periphery relations. As Daniel Brumberg rightly argued, 'for democracy to have any hope in the Arab world, it is not Islam to be fixed, but politics itself'.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

This commentary does not intend to offer a new theoretical perspective for understanding politics in the third world. It merely takes the Turkish case as a departure and argues that the analysis of Turkish politics from a secularist-versus-Islamist perspective will not be helpful in comprehending the forces that shape the Turkish reality as it has existed for quite some time. Rather, the Turkish case should be approached from a centre-periphery perspective, which would help to better understand it. From this angle, the AKP experience in Turkey after 2002 needs special attention. Its existence was the natural result of the newly developing and rapidly globalising periphery in Turkey.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, it has been overwhelmingly supported by the periphery as its voice. In fact, it has been the first party in the history of Turkish politics to increase its votes in the election after its first stint in office.

The success of the AKP has implications beyond Turkey. In almost every third world country, and the Islamic countries in particular, there exists a centre that dominates the power and a periphery that is actually deprived of the power of decision making. For example, in the Middle East there is a distinctive division between the ruling elite and the public. What is striking is that due to lack of democracy and the feudalistic hold of influential families, the excluded majorities have no way to make their voices heard.

The Turkish experience suggests that this dilemma can be resolved peacefully through democratic means. The evolution of the AKP as a political force with the ability to bring the periphery to the centre without alienating and/or clashing directly with the centre represents a major breakthrough, given the current emphasis on the incompatibility of Islam and democracy. This example shows that both can co-exist peacefully with increasing legitimacy from the public. In this sense, Turkey can provide a model for the third world in general and the Islamic world in particular. However, the leaders behind the success of the AKP experience were cautious in projecting Turkey as a model. As early as 2003 they held that Turkey does not aspire to be a model for any country, but other countries could draw lessons from the Turkish experience and

Turkey could be ‘a source of inspiration’ for them in ‘find[ing] their own solutions to their own problems’, in their own way.<sup>19</sup>

## Notes

1. The AKP’s coming to power has been analysed from different angles. For example, Gamze Cavdar sees it from a *new thinking* perspective in ‘Islamist New Thinking in Turkey: A Model for Political Learning?’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 121(3), Autumn 2006, pp. 477–497; for a Muslim-Democrat Party perspective, see Sultan Tepe, ‘Turkey’s AKP: A Model “Muslim-Democrat” Party?’, *Journal of Democracy*, 16(3), April 2005, pp. 69–82 and Vali Nasr, ‘The Rise of “Muslim Democracy”’, *Journal of Democracy*, 16(3), April 2005, pp. 13–27.
2. Omer Taspinar, *Kurdish Nationalism and Political Islam in Turkey: Kemalist Identity in Transition*, Routledge, New York, 2005, p. 116.
3. Binnaz Toprak, *Islam and Political Development*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1981, p. 37.
4. For the ‘popular mind’ concept, see Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1991.
5. Serif Mardin, ‘Center–Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?’, *Daedalus*, 102(1), Winter 1973, p. 70.
6. Omer Taspinar, no. 2, p. 118.
7. See Yildiz Atasoy, *Turkey, Islamists and Democracy: Transition and Globalization in a Muslim State*, I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2005, esp. chapter 2.
8. Consider that in the 1990s almost all ideological parties in Turkey won an election and became part of a coalition: the Islamist Welfare Party in 1995, the Nationalist Action Party in 1999, the Democratic Left Party again in 1999, the Motherland Party and the True Path Party in the early 1990s. The 2002 election brought a completely new party to power, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), along with the Republican Party in opposition.
9. For MUSIAD, see Sennur Ozdemir, *MUSIAD: Anadolu Sermayesinin Donusumu ve Turk Modernlesmesinin Derinlesmesi [MUSIAD: Transformation of Anatolian Capital and the Deepening of Turkish Modernization]*, Vadi Publications, Ankara, 2006.
10. Ahmet Insel’s similar argument after the AKP victory can be extended after the 1980 process in general. See his ‘The AKP and Normalizing Democracy in Turkey’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 102, Spring–Summer 2003, p. 299.
11. See Ziya Onis and E. Fuat Keyman, ‘A New Path Emerges’, *Journal of Democracy*, 14(3), April 2003, pp. 95–107; and Soli Ozel, ‘After the Tsunami’, *Journal of Democracy*, 14(3), April 2003, pp. 80–94.
12. Ergun Ozbudun, ‘From Political Islam to Conservative Democracy: The Case of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey’, *South European Society & Politics*, 11, September–December 2006, p. 543.
13. Ahmet Insel argues that the AKP has a chance to take Turkey out of the September 12 regime. However, he makes a similar point regarding the normalisation of Turkey’s westernisation process. See Ahmet Insel, no. 10, p. 306.
14. For example, see Ergun Ozbudun, no. 12, p. 555.
15. Thomas W. Smith, ‘Between Allah and Ataturk: Liberal Islam in Turkey’, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 27, Summer 2005, p. 307.
16. Analysing Turkey’s model from a foreign policy perspective, Graham Fuller argues that the new Turkey with its independent foreign policy inclinations and sympathy to the Muslim world can be seen as a real model. See his ‘Turkey’s Strategic Model: Myths and Realities’, *The Washington Quarterly*, 27, Summer 2004, pp. 51–64, and his book, *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World*, US Institute of Peace, Washington DC, 2007.
17. Daniel Brumberg, ‘Islam is Not the Solution (or the Problem)’, *The Washington Quarterly*, 29, Winter 2005–2006, p. 99.
18. See Hasan Kosebalaban, ‘The Rise of Anatolian Cities and the Failure of the Modernization Paradigm’, *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 16, September 2007, pp. 229–240.
19. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu’s interview in *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Cairo), at <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/716/focus.htm> (Accessed 10 February 2005); see also Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s interview in *Newsweek*, 12 May 2008, p. 68; and President Abdullah Gul, ‘Turkey’s Role in a Changing Middle East Environment’, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 15, Winter 2004, pp. 2–7.