

A Religious Party Takes Hold: Turkey

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Turkey has a unique position in the Muslim world as a country that held the Caliphate for several hundred years but then turned into a secular republic. Over the past ninety years, Islam has coexisted uneasily with the Turkish state, which has tried both to co-opt and suppress a powerful political Islamic movement that began gathering force in the 1960s. Turkey is unique in the fact that a movement rooted in political Islam managed not only to come to power in democratic elections, but proved able to stay in power and continue to win elections for over a decade.

Whereas this aspect of the Turkish experience is widely lauded by Western observers, there is nevertheless another side to the coin. As the power of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) grew, they also turned increasingly authoritarian and Islamist. Turkey's experience is indicative of the broader nature of "moderate" political Islam, and its relationship with democracy; it suggests that "moderate Islamism" has embraced the mechanics of electoral democracy but not its fundamental values.

The Scene: Turkey's Political System

Since the introduction of multi-party democracy in 1950, Turkey has with brief exceptions been ruled by center-right parties that tried to court religious voters while maintaining a commitment to the secular character of the Turkish state. Importantly, this took place in a Cold War context where the main existential concern was perceived to be the threat from the left. To counter that threat, Turkish governments began to actively support nationalist and Islamic sentiments that were believed to constitute a counter-balance to leftist ideologies. The U.S. government saw little problem with this strategy which would come to consume its creators.

In this context, the 1980 military coup was a decisive event in both a political and ideological sense. Politically, the coup dealt a severe blow to Turkish politics, banning all active political parties. Since the coup was a reaction to the growth of the urban left in Turkey, it hit the Turkish left hard, destroying the foundation of what could have been a social democratic movement in the country. It also created divisions within the center-left and center-right politi-

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cal camps that would contribute to the decade of weak coalition governments in the 1990s—in turn creating the opening in which the AKP would emerge. The 1982 Constitution returned power to civilian rule, but decidedly placed the interests of the state ahead of those of the citizens.

The coup and its aftermath were also of tremendous importance in an intellectual sense. The military junta viewed the left and the Kurdish nationalists, both supported by the Soviet Union, as the main threats to Turkey. In search of an antidote, the military regime supported the rise of what came to be termed the Turkish-Islamic synthesis. This was essentially an attempt to wed right-wing nationalism and Islam in order to build a dominant ideology that would withstand and roll back leftist ideas.

The coup leader and subsequent president, General Kenan Evren, delivered public speeches with the Koran in one hand. The new constitution made education in the tenets of Sunni Islam compulsory in elementary schools (it was already compulsory at the high school level). The expansion of the *imam hatip* schools (government-financed and operated clerical training schools), which began in the 1970s, accelerated. The government oversaw a frenzy of mosque-building; with 85,000 state-operated mosques, nominally secular Turkey has more mosques than any other country. While the imam hatip schools were created to educate prayer leaders in mosques, enrollment rapidly came to vastly

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exceed the need for prayer leaders. For example, girls, who are barred by the rules of Islam from serving as prayer leaders, make up the majority of students in these schools, as religious conservative families prefer to send their daughters to them. As a result of the surplus of graduates from religious schools, a new Islamic intelligentsia was born, which gradually came to occupy positions of power within the bureaucracy,

academic world, and media. As the left disappeared, Islamism—understood here as “a form of social and political activism grounded in an idea that public and political life should be guided by a set of Islamic principles”¹—emerged as an intellectual force to be reckoned with. The 1980s saw the proliferation of Islamic publications and the emergence of Islamic media. At first financed by capital from other Muslim countries, particularly those in the Persian Gulf, the internal sources of Islamic funding acquired growing significance.

Thus, it was the military itself that provided a boost to Islamic conservatism.² The military paid lip service to the secularist legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk while distorting it. Atatürk’s cult of personality began at the founding of the republic, but truly became significant in the 1980s and 1990s. As a result, historian Taner Timur observed in 1991 that, “by utilizing Kemalism as a label for policies that are in marked contradiction with its [Kemalism’s] core principles, the 1980 coup finally succeeded in repelling democrats from Atatürk.”³ Therefore, as scholar Halil Karaveli concludes, the widely held notion

of the Turkish military as the “unwavering watchdogs of the Atatürk Legacy” is a modern myth. “The military undermined the Atatürk legacy first by the promotion of the Islamization of society and of the state ideology, and secondly, and perhaps more devastatingly, by mobilizing the Atatürk legacy of secularism (or rather the rhetoric about it) in the service of authoritarianism.”⁴

The Turkish Islamic Movement

The Islamic movement in Turkey is divided into numerous sects and associations, which form the base for Islamist social and political forces. They differ from each other most importantly in the form of Islam to which they adhere and in their attitude to Turkish nationalism and the Turkish state. The movements range from forces merging Turkish nationalism and Islam that accepted the Turkish state, to those rejecting the state in favor of pan-Islamic unity. Two key movements are of note: the *Milli Görüş* (National Outlook) movement is the prevailing Islamist group in politics, whereas the modernist *Hizmet* (Service) movement led by cleric Fethullah Gülen has been more influential in civil society.

Turkey’s political Islamic movement has been dominated by the conservative Naqshbandiyya Sufi order and its derivative, the Milli Görüş organization.⁵ The Milli Görüş movement, the backbone of political Islam in Turkey, developed a worldview that is built essentially on two pillars: the imported ideology of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and nostalgia for Turkey’s Ottoman past. Led by Professor Necmettin Erbakan, the movement’s core consists of followers of the Iskenderpaşa wing of the Khaledi branch of the Naqshbandi Sufi order. The orthodox nature of the Naqshbandis is best illustrated by their fierce resistance to the westernizing reforms of the Ottoman empire in the nineteenth century.⁶

Like other religious orders, the Naqshbandis were driven underground by the proclamation of the Turkish republic and the official closure of the religious orders. Following Atatürk’s death, the Naqshbandis became increasingly involved in politics, seeking to revive religious values. The Milli Görüş movement’s members pay considerably less attention to the Turkish ethnic bond than to the broader Muslim identity. As Ahmet Yıldız has observed, Turkish Islamic thought had been “inward-oriented” and had “nationalist-local leanings”; it now became “more universally oriented” as a result of “gaining access to ‘global’ currents of Islamic thought,” in particular Islamist movements in Egypt and Pakistan, and later, Iran.⁷

The platform of Milli Görüş, with its Manichean worldview, selective interpretation of Islamic history, and fierce anti-Semitism, is strongly influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood’s ideology. Another plank that Milli Görüş adopted from the Muslim Brotherhood was a staunch opposition to Europe and the West, founded upon a condemnation of the incompatibility of its politics and culture with Islamic principles. Thus, as Turkish scholar Ihsan Dağı has observed, opposition to Turkey’s European orientation lies at the very heart of the Turkish Islamist movement’s identity.⁸ The main goal of the movement

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The Gülen movement, which President Erdoğan accuses of being behind the failed military coup in 2016, is a different story. It comes from a different tradition, the *Nurcu* (roughly translated as the “followers of light”) that strongly objects to direct involvement in politics, which members

believe would create a conflict of interest and weaken the movement's main aim of instilling in its members “service to the faith.” Thus, the Gülen movement has traditionally refrained from supporting political Islam and from direct participation in politics. It terms itself “civil Islam” in contrast to “political Islam.” Yet in practice, it offered indirect support to Turkey's successive center-right parties that supported religious freedom, sought to appeal to conservative Muslims, and allowed the Gülen movement to expand its role in society, particularly in the areas of education, business, and media. Most importantly, the Gülen movement from the 1980s onward systematically began to acquire influence in the state bureaucracy, as its well-educated members rose through the ranks.

The Transformation of Turkey's Islamic Movement: Religious Party No More?

Erbakan's Refah party gained power at both the local and national levels in the mid-1990s. This prompted a reaction from the military and bureaucratic elite, which helped oust Erbakan from power in 1997—and paved the way for the transformation of Turkey's Islamic party into a movement that claimed no longer to be Islamist, but simply consisted of conservative democrats. In this lies the remarkable success of the AKP.

Islamists in Power

When Erbakan attained power in 1996, his party very much hewed to its core instincts. When serving as Prime Minister in a coalition government in 1996–97, Erbakan began to pull Turkey in an Islamist direction, including speaking favorably of the introduction of Sharia. This led the military and civilian establishment to engineer a public campaign against his government, and to orchestrate the coalition's downfall in the summer of 1997. The early demise of his government did not spell the end of the Milli Görüş ideology. Rather, it taught Turkey's Islamists important lessons about political survival and set the stage for a more thorough transformation of Turkish politics.

The Constitutional Court in January 1998 closed down the Welfare Party, stranding the Islamist movement in the political wilderness. Erbakan and

several of his associates were barred from politics, and the party's firebrand Istanbul mayor, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, served several months in jail for reciting a poem deemed to incite religious hatred.

The Transformation

To a younger generation of Islamists, the lesson was obvious: Erbakan's old-fashioned tactics would never succeed in achieving lasting power; the military and judiciary could clip their wings at any time. Facing this mighty state, the Islamist movement had to embark on a political transformation. Following the debacle of the late 1990s, a young guard led by Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül launched a top-down, comprehensive, and rapid remake of political Islam. When the Welfare Party's successor, the *Fazilet Partisi* (Virtue Party) was also closed down by court order in June 2001, the young reformers, as they came to be known, split to create the (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party - AKP).

The difference between the AKP's positions and those of its predecessors is most apparent in the moderation of its rhetoric and attitude toward the European Union. The AKP made no reference to Islamism, emphasized its commitment to democracy, and sought to be accepted as a mainstream conservative force akin to the Christian Democratic parties of Europe.⁹ Where Milli Görüş had been critical of the globalized market economy, the AKP embraced it. Where the old guard saw the European Union as a "Christian club," the AKP fully endorsed Turkey's EU membership aspirations.

The rise of Tayyip Erdoğan as the leader of the reformist camp was perhaps surprising, given his militancy in the early 1990s. In spite of the many controversies surrounding his Islamist pronouncements, he showed talent as a manager. He was widely lauded for his tenure as Mayor of Istanbul until one of his vitriolic speeches landed him in prison. This was a crucial turning point in two ways. First, it built the aura of victimization that enabled Erdoğan to emerge as the leader of a group of various conservative forces that similarly styled themselves as having been victimized by 70 years of secular rule. Second, it also provided him with the opportunity to reset his political profile, which he did by adopting the identity of a conservative democrat.

In late 2000 and early 2001, Turkey went through a deep financial crisis that shook the banking system to its core and led to a devaluation of the currency by 40 percent. This shook the last of Turks' confidence in the establishment political parties and provided the AKP with an excellent opportunity to make its case to the voters. In the November 2002 elections, the AKP emerged as by far the largest party, with almost 36 percent of the vote. Since only one other party—the center-left Republican People's Party (CHP)—crossed the ten percent threshold required to win seats in parliament, the AKP was easily able to form a single-party government.

Making Sense of the Transformation

Was the AKP's transformation tactical and opportunistic, or did it reflect a sincere change of heart? In hindsight, arguments can be made both ways. One possible interpretation is that the Islamic conservatives came to understand that

they could not ascend to, let alone maintain, power as long as the military and Kemalist establishment effectively exercised veto power and was able to unseat

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governments. They needed an outside lever to change this situation. The EU, seeking to democratize Turkey, was increasingly zeroing in on the role of the military in the Turkish state, which was fundamentally incompatible with EU membership. Thus, the Islamic conservatives may

have come to see the EU as a way to defeat the institutional advantages of their political opponents.

The alternative interpretation is that their time in government (1996–97) jolted the Islamist movement from being an opposition force to one that needed to govern. This made them realize Turkey's economic dependence on Europe. Meanwhile, their experience at the hands of the military made them increasingly conversant in the principles of European democracy and human rights, which they deployed to confront the establishment. It was the European Court of Human Rights to which they turned in seeking to overturn the closure of their parties, and it was European legal reasoning that they employed in support of their case. In this interpretation, the Islamic conservatives came to see Europe both as a lever against the establishment and as a leveler of the playing field, enabling them to operate on equal terms with other political forces.¹⁰

Both of these perspectives carry explanatory power for different persons and groupings within the Islamic conservative movement. The more that young AKP cadres listened to the democratic and pro-European rhetoric of their leaders, the more likely they were to become sincerely pro-Europe and pro-democracy. But with hindsight, it is clear that the political metamorphosis that gave birth to the AKP did not produce a radical change in the basic worldview of the movement's leaders. At the very least, their transformation was shallow enough that events over time could lead them to return to their original thinking.

Moderate Islam in Power

The AKP's period in power, dating from 2002 to the present, has seen fundamental change in Turkey—and in the party itself. The AKP, and Erdogan, undoubtedly deserve credit in their early days for dismantling the rigid statist structure that had dominated Turkey for decades, and which had led the country to stagnate. Many taboos were broken, and the combination of liberal reforms and the globalization of Turkey's economy contributed to making debate and discussion a lot more open than it had been a decade earlier. But over the next few terms, these positive changes would come undone. In the AKP's second term, ranging from 2007–11, a more nuanced picture emerged, with these positive factors increasingly balanced by worrying signs of authoritarian retrenchment and the initial phase of an Erdogan personality cult. In

the third term, from 2010 to 2015, that trend deepened, and the authoritarian and autocratic tendencies began to come out in full force. The fourth term, from 2015 onward, saw an increasingly harsh and repressive political environment develop with Erdoğan working to restore the statist structure he had helped dismantle fifteen years ago. It is now clear that the alternative to secular statism in Turkey is not liberal democracy. Following the purges and crackdowns on dissent that followed the failed coup of summer 2016, Turkey today is less liberal than it was in 2002. Military tutelage, it is now clear, has been replaced by an Islamist-leaning form of authoritarianism and one-man rule.

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First Term: Unseating Semi-Authoritarianism

When the AKP was created in August 2001, one of the rationales was to move away from Necmettin Erbakan's single-handed dominance over Turkey's Islamist politics for three decades. Thus, the AKP espoused a more collegial, more democratic decision-making system, where power was shared within a relatively open circle of government leaders.

During its first term, the AKP implemented some of the most thorough economic and political reforms in Turkey's history, which led to an extended period of high growth, broadened minority rights, and allowed Turkey to begin negotiations for membership in the European Union. The reforms brought the AKP almost unreserved support from intellectuals in Europe. But even then, the AKP displayed a tendency to purge government offices and replace civil servants with elements closer to the party's ideological views, a practice known as *kadrola ma* (cadrelization). During this period, the AKP avoided raising religious matters, going as far as to ignore demands from its base to work to overturn the ban on headscarves in universities and public offices.

Around 2005, however, the AKP appeared to lose interest in Europe. Superficially, this could be linked to growing anti-Turkish rhetoric emanating from major European leaders, primarily Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy. This generated growing anti-European sentiments, and strengthened the Muslim identity politics that had already taken root in the post-September 11 political atmosphere. Among Islamic conservatives the US invasion of Iraq had also come to play an important role in a growing tendency to view the world as increasingly polarized between the West and the Muslim world.

Yet the AKP's change of heart was not simply the West's fault. In fact, leading AKP figures seemed to lose faith in the extent to which Europe was useful to its domestic agenda. A case in point is the headscarf issue, and more broadly the AKP's hope of using the rhetoric of individual freedom to break down the restrictions on religion that Turkey's French-style secularism mandated. Many AKP members interviewed by this author point to *Leyla Şahin vs. Turkey*, a case before the European Court of Human Rights, in which a female university student prohibited from attending university with an Islamic headscarf sued Turkey, arguing (with the AKP leadership agreeing) that the headscarf ban violated her rights. But the Court upheld the headscarf ban. AKP leaders then

concluded that Europe was not a consistent proxy in their efforts to confront Turkey's secular state establishment.

Most of all, however, the AKP turned its attention to the consolidation of power. The big prize was capturing the presidency, which aside from the Constitutional Court was the only major institution not under the AKP's control. Given the extensive veto powers of the presidency, this was a major impediment to the party's ability to freely set the country's agenda. Through a protracted political crisis that saw both a botched military attempt to oppose the AKP's candidate and early elections that returned the AKP to power with a renewed mandate, the AKP eventually managed to install its foreign minister, Abdullah Gül, in the presidential palace at Çankaya.

Second Term: Stagnation

Crucially, during the AKP's second term, Prime Minister Erdoğan emerged as the undisputed and towering leader of the government and party. Because his long-time partner Abdullah Gül was elected president, he was no longer involved in day-to-day government affairs, and gradually grew into the presidential role as a balancer of Erdoğan's power rather than his closest ally. Thus, by fall 2007, Erdoğan was in sole command, a role he would soon seek to enshrine in law. By 2008, the change in leadership style was patently visible. Gone was the Erdoğan who patiently allowed debate even on small issues; instead appeared another Erdoğan, increasingly intolerant of criticism and deaf to advice and debate. Observers noted that most AKP deputies now lacked the courage to demand an appointment with Erdoğan. Cabinet and party group meetings were turned into his private stage, where ministers and deputies were not expected to speak or ask questions. This shed considerable doubt on the relevance of Erdoğan's much-heralded inclusion of liberal and secular candidates in the party lists for the 2007 elections. These came to realize that they entirely lacked influence over government policy and were mainly window-dressing.

The capture of the presidency allowed the AKP to speed up the process of cadreization in the state bureaucracy. This meant, in practice, that members of religious communities and brotherhoods rapidly advanced through the bureaucracy. During this period, this meant both followers of Erdoğan's own

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Naqshbandi order and his tactical allies in the Gülen movement. Indeed, the Gülen movement possessed valuable and dedicated cadres with postgraduate degrees, often from Western universities—which were rare among the brotherhoods more directly loyal to Erdoğan.

In their joint zeal to take over the state, Erdoğan and his Gülenist allies displayed a worrying tendency to use their growing influence over the judiciary to intimidate oppositional forces. This was most vividly apparent by a series of large trials in which alleged

cabals of fringe nationalists were convicted of plotting Erdoğan's overthrow. These trials initially appeared a much-needed opportunity to rid Turkey of

well-known shady connections between the state, vigilante groups, and organized crime. It is now clear that there was no convincing evidence to convict the hundreds of military officers, university rectors, NGO activists, and journalists that were incarcerated. In fact, the indictments included deep inconsistencies and internal contradictions as well as clearly manipulated evidence. To make matters worse, evidence from the investigations was systematically leaked to the pro-AKP press. The investigation's intent and effect was to create a climate of fear among the opponents of the AKP and Islamic conservatism.¹¹

These purges were initially a joint venture between the AKP and the Gülen movement. Over time, it became increasingly clear that the Gülenists were the driving force, using the purges to clear the way for the movement's own followers to rise up in the bureaucracy and the military.¹² By 2010, this began to rankle Erdoğan, who grew increasingly apprehensive about the Gülen movement's loyalties—a prelude to their subsequent confrontation that culminated in the July 2016 coup and the subsequent repression of anything and anyone connected to Gülen.

In parallel, Turkey's general democratic development took a hit as media freedoms were gradually curtailed through intimidation of critical media outlets. When intimidation failed, Erdoğan loyalists, particularly family holdings with strong connections to the Naqshbandi brotherhood employed hostile takeovers.

The constitutional amendments approved by referendum on September 12, 2010 were part and parcel of this picture. Several of the lesser amendments were intended to shore up domestic and European support for AKP reforms, but the key changes increased the power of the ruling party over appointments to Turkey's highest judiciary bodies. Because the referendum helped overturn the secular establishment's control over the judiciary, it eventually helped cement Erdoğan's position as the most powerful leader in Turkish history since Atatürk.

This referendum whetted Erdoğan's appetite for an executive Presidency which he first declared his support for in April 2010.¹³ No longer constrained by the Kemalist establishment, and having overturned the secular establishment's control over the judiciary through the referendum, Erdoğan was now free to chart Turkey's course. He could have capitalized on his accomplishments to usher in a more liberal and democratic order as he had promised. Instead, he single-mindedly sought to concentrate as much power as possible into his own hands. In parallel with tumultuous developments in Turkey's neighborhood, Erdoğan's domestic and foreign agendas were to take a clearly Islamist turn.

Third Term to the Present: Regression and Islamization

In June 2011, banking on his control over the mainstream media, the opposition's weakness and division, and the ruling party's superior financial resources, Erdogan led the AKP to a third consecutive electoral victory, this time coming just short of 50 percent of the vote. All indications suggest the endorsement by voters was primarily due to the healthy state of Turkey's economy at a time when the West was experiencing significant problems. But Erdogan interpreted it as a license to rule Turkey by the sheer force of his personality and as a

launching pad to seek a dominant role in a Middle East now convulsed by the Arab upheavals. Erdoğan set lofty goals for Turkey. By 2023, the centenary of the Republic, Turkey would be among the world's ten leading economic powers. Yet instead, over the next five years, Turkey would be convulsed by domestic instability, including the Gezi park riots of 2013 and the civil war within the Turkish state between Erdoğan and the Gülen movement. Meanwhile, its more activist and ideological foreign policy would leave Turkey increasingly marginalized on the international scene.

The 2011 election campaign was based almost exclusively on Erdoğan's person; he had purged the party lists of most supporters of President Gül and the Gülen movement from the parliamentary group. This is why Erdoğan concluded he had a personal mandate to rule Turkey as he saw fit. He began to return to the radicalism of his youth, exhibiting strong Islamist tendencies that he had suppressed for close to a decade. Erdoğan began to engage in frequent emotional diatribes on social issues. He vowed to raise "pious generations," urged women to have at least three children (a number he later raised to four), and issued plans to outlaw abortion and cesarean sections and to reintroduce capital punishment. Perhaps most infamously, in spring 2012 he pledged allegiance to "one nation, one flag, one religion, one state."¹⁴

This raised the suspicion that Erdoğan's caution and moderation from 2001 to 2008 had been primarily tactical. There is indeed a direct correlation between Erdoğan's consolidation of power and the resurgence of his authoritarian and Islamist pronouncements. A key element is Erdoğan's increasingly conspiratorial worldview. His lashing out at imagined foreign foes for Turkey's

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problems is often viewed as tactical, but there is substantial reason to believe that Erdoğan and his key advisors truly believe in many of the conspiracy theories they peddle, particularly those involving "world Jewry." Erdoğan has shown how dangerously conspiratorial and paranoid

his worldview has become on several occasions. After the 2013 Gezi park riots, he and his allies infamously blamed the "interest rate lobby," a code word for Jews, sometimes openly referring to a Jewish world conspiracy and unnamed Western forces seeking to thwart Turkey's rise.¹⁵ And his reaction to the corruption probe was simply to name the Gülen movement as an agent of this vast international conspiracy against Turkey, which by now included the United States itself.

The AKP has presided over a gradual but unmistakable ramping up of efforts to Islamize Turkish society. While this had begun on a subtle level early on, Islamization became considerably bolder following the Arab Spring and the 2011 elections. The most important of these is the 2012 reform of the education sector, which is now heavily infused with Islamic themes. Alongside this is the rise of the *Diyanet* (Presidency of Religious Affairs) in Turkish politics and society. Importantly, there has been a strong interaction between domestic and foreign policy. While scholars often speak of the impact of domestic

concerns on foreign policy, in the Turkish case the reverse is true. The 2011 Arab upheavals accelerated the return to the AKP's ideological roots also at home. The perception of a major historical event taking shape, which Turkey was destined to lead, helped remove remaining inhibitions about more overt Islamic policies on the domestic front.

In February 2012, Erdoğan stated that his government aimed to “raise pious generations.” Beginning that month, his government embarked on a wholesale reform designed to Islamize Turkey's education system.¹⁶ The package of educational reforms was hastily rammed through parliament virtually without debate or consultations with civil society organizations. The purpose of the bill was to roll back the secularizing education reforms that accompanied the 1997 military intervention, which had removed Turkey's first Islamist-led government from power. On the surface, the law extended compulsory schooling by four years, making school compulsory for a full 12 years. But in fact, the reforms did the exact opposite—imam hatip schools were once again permitted from fifth grade. The law also allows parents to home-school children after fourth grade which is expected to lead to a reduction of formal schooling, especially for girls in rural areas. In other words, the reforms had the effect of weakening the unified secular education system that had existed, and allowed religious and home-schooling options to proliferate

As Turkish writer Orhan Kemal Cengiz observed, the reforms turned “religious schools from a selective option to a central institution in the education system.”¹⁷ The reforms introduced entrance examinations for all high schools except the imam-hatip schools. Thus, students who do not qualify for other schools would have no choice but to enroll in religious schools. Reports suggested that the number of attendees in imam-hatip schools subsequently exploded to far over a million students.¹⁸ While the imam-hatip schools are growing rapidly, the reforms also greatly expanded the religious content of academic high schools. Turkey is going directly against a judgment of the European Court of Human Rights, which ruled in 2007 that Turkey's compulsory classes in religious education, which feature only education in the tenets of Sunni Islam, violated the religious rights of minorities.¹⁹ The government renamed the class to “Religious Culture and Moral Values,” to make it appear broader in scope, but students are still required to memorize a long list of Quranic verses and prayers, but not texts from any other religion.²⁰

The reforms also extended the compulsory religious classes, and introduced elective courses in “the life of Prophet Muhammad” and “the Quran.” That way, students could receive up to six hours of religious education per week. Meanwhile, the reforms shortened the number of total hours of school per week, leading to the abolition of classes on citizenship and democracy.²¹ And while the religious classes are elective in theory, in practice they are often not: AKP-appointed school administrators can decide what elective classes are to be offered, and examples abound of schools where only religious electives are offered.²²

Erdoğan has also accelerated the process of building a major official religious hierarchy, the *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* (Directorate for Religious Affairs). The Diyanet was created in the 1920s in order to maintain state control

over the religious sphere of Islam. All imams in every mosque across Turkey are appointed by the Diyanet, which writes their Friday sermons. This helped legitimize the modernization and westernization of Turkey from a religious perspective, and prevented the mosque from becoming a central focal point for reactionary activity. But the Diyanet constituted a check on political Islam only as long as the republican establishment controlled the state. Once the state was under the control of political Islam, it instead became a tool for the propagation of this ideology.

Under the AKP, however, the Diyanet has grown exponentially. In less than a decade its budget has more than quadrupled to slightly more than \$2 billion. It now employs over 120,000 people. That makes it one of Turkey's largest state institutions, bigger than the Ministry of Interior.²³ As the Diyanet has grown, its character has also changed. Previously, a solid proportion of its personnel were regular government bureaucrats. The makeup of its staff has now taken on a more Islamic character by employing theology graduates.

The Diyanet largely stayed out of politics until 2010, when Erdoğan succeeded in ousting a secularist-appointed Diyanet head who he replaced with a pliant loyalist, Mehmet Görmez. In 2011, the Diyanet began issuing halal certificates for food products. The next year it opened a television station. The Diyanet now produces fatwas on demand. A free telephone hotline service provides Islamic guidance on everyday matters—as one analyst termed it, the hotline, “encourages callers to harmonize their daily lives with the principles of Islam.”²⁴ Legally speaking, it is entirely voluntary to follow the Diyanet's rulings. But it is unprecedented for a state agency to provide religious sanction of day-to-day behavior, and flagrantly violates the concept of secular statehood.

Aside from staffing mosques, the Diyanet focuses on religious education, running imam-hatip schools and offering Quran courses that since 2012 are no longer co-managed with the Ministry of Education and no longer have lower age limits. Quran courses, often held in the summer holiday, are now permitted to have dormitories—a crucial change that enables the full immersion of young children in a religious lifestyle.²⁵ As one Turkish commentator concluded, this has led to, “the removal, in practice, of one of the most important laws of the revolution,” the *Tevhid-i Tedrisat* (unity of education).²⁶ The full consequences of these reforms will be visible only in time, but it is clear that they will hasten the Islamization of society.

The Diyanet has also become more vocal in public debate. Its press releases have supported the introduction of greater Islamic themes in public education, and Görmez has repeatedly directed criticism at the Pope.²⁷ He has called for the “liberation of the Al-Aqsa Mosque” and said that there is “no difference between Israel and ISIS” in terms of the religious doctrines that led to the creation of their respective state entities.²⁸ The Diyanet has also made itself useful in domestic and foreign political struggles. Its mosques mobilized Erdoğan supporters during the July 2016 coup, and its large network of mosques across Europe, particularly in Germany, have been used to mobilize Turks for Erdoğan there and to intimidate and collect intelligence on followers of regime opponents.

Thus, in recent years, Turkey has acquired a directorate of religious affairs that comments on political affairs, advises citizens on religiously acceptable conduct, and is embarking on a major effort to spread Quranic education to all corners of society. The rhetoric of the Diyanet often paints itself as a bulwark against radicalism, but the Diyanet's own theology slowly and gradually appears to have been infiltrated by Islamist ideology with roots in the Middle East.²⁹ Given the influence that the Diyanet-controlled mosques have on the conservative masses across Turkey, this development is both among the most consequential and least known accomplishments of the AKP.

Thus, in recent years, Turkey has acquired a directorate of religious affairs that comments on political affairs, advises citizens on religiously acceptable conduct, and is embarking on a major effort to spread Quranic education to all corners of society.

Countdown to a Coup

An analysis of the rise of Turkey's religious party would not be complete without a treatment of the fallout between President Erdoğan and the Fethullah Gülen community. The latter was long an important ally in Erdoğan's bid for control over the Turkish state. Yet since 2011, a key dynamic in Turkish politics has been the failure of these two groups to share power and their increasingly ferocious battle to destroy each other. While the Gülenists were increasingly assertive, Erdoğan's efforts to concentrate power in his own hands also exacerbated the confrontation. In early 2012, Gülen-aligned prosecutors sought to arrest the leadership of the National Intelligence Organization, including its head, Erdoğan's chief confidant Hakan Fidan.³⁰ Erdoğan used his authority to fend off those prosecutors. Then, in 2013, Erdoğan (probably incorrectly) saw a Gülenist hand in the Gezi Park protests. Thus, that fall, the government announced legislation that would ban the preparatory schools that provided some of the Gülen movement's income and most of its recruits.³¹ That prompted a Gülenist counter-strike in December 2013. An arrest wave ordered by Gülenist prosecutors targeted four ministers and their entourage. Subsequently, leaked evidence implicating Erdoğan's family and inner circle of large-scale corruption went viral on social media.³² Erdoğan was able to avoid a second arrest wave that was to target members of his family only by rapid executive action.³³

This triggered mutual denunciations by both Erdoğan and Gülen. Erdoğan accused Gülen of leading a criminal gang controlled by outside forces; Gülen answered with a dramatic, televised sermon in which he called on the wrath of God to strike the sinners. Purges of Gülenists within the state bureaucracy intensified, while Gülenist outlets continued to release and publicize incriminating information on Erdoğan. This led Erdoğan to strike an anti-Gülenist alliance with the general staff, which provided for the release of previously jailed officers. This did not help a weakened Erdoğan from failing

to secure a parliamentary majority in the June 2015 election, something that nearly led him to lose power. He proceeded to essentially disregard the election, rule informally by presidential fiat, restart the war with the PKK, and call for new elections where he rode a nationalist wave to victory.³⁴

During 2015 and 2016, it appears that Erdoğan was pushing for a purge of Gülenist officers within the military. What remains a mystery to this day is why Erdoğan and the general staff did not move earlier to purge the Gülenist presence in the army. On July 15, 2016 a section of the Turkish military attempted to take power, but failed largely because significant parts of the chain of command opposed the coup and remained loyal to Erdoğan. Erdoğan, of course, blames the Gülen movement for the failed coup, and has purged tens of thousands of state employees considered to be followers of the movement. And while there are indications that followers of Gülen played an important role in the coup, they were far from the only force involved. The coup involved forces so high up the chain of command and so disparate that they were highly unlikely to be only followers of Gülen.³⁵ The coup, in a sense, formed the culmination of the Erdoğan-Gülen battle for control within the Turkish state has left the country's state institutions in ruins.

We may never know exactly the extent and character of Gülenist involvement in the 2016 coup. But what is clear is that the AKP tenure in power, hailed as the coming of a liberal order, degenerated into a clash for control between two rival parts of the Turkish Islamic movement.

Conclusions

The evolution of the AKP and its leader hold considerable implications for our understanding of political Islam in Turkey and elsewhere. While this analysis

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has focused entirely on the AKP's domestic policies, the progression of Turkey's foreign policy is a further important aspect outside the scope of this paper.

The AKP could be termed the most successful Islamist political party ever. Not only has it taken and

held power in one of the largest and most influential Muslim countries, its leadership, Erdoğan in particular, also have become heroes of the "Arab street."³⁶ It defeated an entrenched elite by political and judicial rather than bloody means, and has weathered a series of challenges to its power, managing continuously to prevail at the voting booth. The party came to power and consolidated power on the basis of a message that it was dismantling a semi-authoritarian state structure with a view to opening the way for liberal democracy. Yet with every step to consolidate power, the AKP's respect for democratic principles declined precipitously.

The increasingly pressing question is to what extent is its departure from its stated ideals the result of one man, as opposed to the party's inherent ideo-

logical worldview? The answer has implications for our understanding of other purportedly moderate Islamist movements. There is no question that Erdogan's personality has played a role. The transformation of the party and movement which he led occurred directly in parallel to the evolution of Erdogan's rhetoric and thinking. Furthermore, his grip on the movement grew more solid. Would the AKP have been different under a different leader, such as Abdullah Gül? In terms of style and rhetoric, this is to some extent likely. Yet it is also clear that few of the Islamists that accepted the AKP's democratic rhetoric in the early 2000s seem to have objected to the party's democratic retrenchment. The centrists who jumped on the AKP bandwagon were subsequently forced out. Only in 2013 with the Gezi park protests did a small number of AKP officials resign in protest against the crackdown. As a whole, it is striking with what ease the AKP's leadership first took the movement toward—and then away from—a liberal democratic rhetoric and practice.

Inevitably, Turkey's recent evolution has raised suspicions that the AKP's democratic rhetoric was insincere in the first place. Numerous liberal Turkish thinkers who supported the AKP in its first two terms have come to conclude that the AKP at the very least abandoned its adherence to democratic ideals as soon as it consolidated power. Thus, Ihsan Dağı has observed that, "claiming control over the entire state apparatus, Erdoğan and his associates no longer needed the protection of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Instead, the personal rule of Erdoğan, who has recently displayed the attitude of an intrusive and authoritarian statesman, has been established."³⁷

In the final analysis, the AKP's evolution cannot be reduced to Erdogan's personality. In fact, the evolution of its rhetoric and practice is anchored in the way its understanding of democracy is informed by its ideology. Numerous writers have observed that the AKP has increasingly developed what Ergun Özbudun calls an, "excessively majoritarian or even plebiscitarian conception of democracy."³⁸ This is by no means limited to Erdogan alone, but appears to inform the entire movement he leads. On numerous occasions, Erdogan and his allies have justified their actions with the notion that the party or the leader won 50 percent of the vote, and thus has a majority of the people behind him. Most remarkably, this was Erdogan's answer to the serious corruption allegations voiced in 2013; he claimed that only the ballot box would decide whether his government was guilty of corruption. If he won the upcoming local elections (where he and his closest associates accused of corruption were not on the ballot) it would mean that his government was honest.³⁹ At the very least, this suggests a fundamental misconception of democracy as being based exclusively on elections, rather than a system of government encompassing the rule of law, limited government, and protection of minorities.

In this, Erdogan and the AKP are not alone. This majoritarianism is a feature of many prominent "moderate Islamist" movements, not least the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.⁴⁰ As one author put it, Egypt's short-lived Brotherhood President Muhammed Morsi espoused a "majoritarian mindset [that] depends upon a distinctive conception of winner-takes-all politics and the denigration of political opposition."⁴¹

Especially after the April 2017 referendum that ushered in a system of government with no checks and balances, it is not clear that the AKP can be called a democratic movement at all. Leading intellectuals who once supported the AKP have come to a different conclusion. Author Murat Belge now terms it a “majoritarian dictatorial regime,” and scholar Ihsan Dağı calls it “post-modern authoritarianism.”⁴² What does this mean for the relationship of political Islam and democracy, or more specifically for the argument, advanced hopefully by Vali Nasr a decade ago, that political Islam had morphed into “Muslim democracy?”⁴³ If the most democratically advanced Islamist political party anywhere has retrenched this significantly from its earlier democratic rhetoric and practice, does that mean that political Islam remains incompatible with democracy? That conclusion remains a bridge too far, because political Islam, like any political movement, is a phenomenon in constant evolution. Just like authoritarian left-wing ideologies in Europe a century ago, political Islam may still come to embrace the values of democracy at some point. What the Turkish experience suggests is that such a scenario remains unfulfilled. Thus far, political Islam tends to view democracy more in terms of an instrument to achieve and maintain power and legitimacy rather than a set of values and principles that have been thoroughly internalized.

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