



Turkey's Elections Democratic Islamists?

By Svante Cornell and Kemal Kaya

The landslide victory of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey's July parliamentary elections was a somewhat paradoxical event. When political parties rooted in political Islam win elections, Western powers are usually worried. But this time, the West cheered the election as a victory of Turkey's evolving democracy. Then again, Turkey has always been an outlier in the Muslim world—the AKP, the primary representative of political Islam in the country, in fact claims no longer to be Islamist. What does this election portend for Turkey and for its relationship with the West?

The AKP emerged in 2002 from the ashes of two successive Islamist parties—the Welfare and Virtue parties—that had been banned by Turkey’s constitutional court on account of their violation of the Turkish republic’s constitutionally mandated doctrine of secularism. In this sense, the AKP’s formation varied little from established practice: When Islamist—or, for that matter, Kurdish—political leaders in Turkey see their party about to be closed down, they simply form a new one. But there was a major difference: In 2002, the Islamist movement split into two factions. The moderate faction created the AKP, while the more orthodox Islamist wing formed the Saadet or Felicity Party. Of the hundred-odd Islamist deputies in the parliament, roughly equivalent numbers joined the two parties. But in the 2002 elections, which followed on the heels of the devastating financial crisis of 2001 that

thrashed the credibility of Turkey’s traditional ruling elites, Saadet managed to collect only 2.5 percent of the vote, while the AKP won 35 percent, enabling it to form a single-party government.

This background is indicative of two major truths about the AKP. First, its success has been less about the political ideology it represents and more about voters being disenchanted with the corrupt and bickering parties on the traditional political center-left and center-right that dominated the first five decades of Turkey’s democracy. Second, its continued appeal is due

largely to its ability to attract a broad right-wing coalition, capturing liberal, conservative and nationalist voters that never would have considered voting for any of the AKP’s predecessor parties.

AKP Wins Big at the Ballot Box

In 2007, the AKP won its landslide reelection with close to 47 percent of the vote mainly for three reasons, none

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SAIS DEGREE

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How did your SAIS education prepare you for a career in politics/government/political advocacy?

I have had the unique pleasure of enjoying a rich career where I have served in senior positions within the public, private and civil society sectors. The “language” and the “compass” provided at SAIS—and the platform the school provides us as students and alums—gives us the capability to navigate using strong negotiation, diplomacy and relationship-building skills, along with strong quantitative/economic capabilities.

What do you think is the most critical election taking place around the world in 2007–08 and why?

The U.S. presidential election in 2008 is among the most important elections in our nation’s history and is extremely significant globally. The need for the United States to reposition itself on the global stage as the leader and to reestablish its diplomatic credentials has never been higher.

of which related to its Islamist background.

First, opposition to the AKP remained sclerotic. Bickering leaders on the center-right failed to unite and form a credible alternative, allowing the AKP to basically swallow that political movement. This left voters with two alternatives: the left wing, as always out of touch with Turkey’s conservative rural masses, and a militant nationalist party. Both are anti-European and anti-American.

Second, the AKP built on its socio-economic record. During its time in government, Turkey’s endemic double- or triple-digit inflation dropped to single digits within the framework of an International Monetary Fund program, bringing economic stability and among the highest growth levels in Europe. Its single-party government, following years of unstable coalitions, contributed to political stability. Moreover, the AKP government offered some relief to Turkey’s poor, moving most of the population into the social security system for the first time. In rural areas, new government programs funded investments in water, roads, bridges and other infrastructure.

Third, the AKP further toned down its Islamist image, reaching out to an ever wider right-of-center constituency. It did so by removing some of the most ardent Islamists from its candidate lists and replacing them with liberal intellectuals and businessmen co-opted into the party.

In retrospect, it is clear that the political polarization of the past spring also helped the AKP at the ballot box. The April presidential election, where the AKP struggled to have its Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul elected, was derailed by a legally questionable court decision and an ensuing military memorandum. These events combined with mass demonstrations by secularist forces in society and appear to have led conservative forces to rally around the AKP. The opposition’s poor showing helped the AKP too: The two parties that did get into parliament focused their campaigns almost exclusively on secular-

ist and nationalist rhetoric, which did not instill confidence that they were capable of running the country and attending to the population’s more mundane needs.

As a result, the AKP not only won a second term in power in last month’s elections but also became the first Turkish party since the 1950s to increase its share of the vote while in power. And the AKP was able to install Gul as president following the elections.

This provides hope for long-term political stability, but only if the AKP stays true to its promise of moderation. If the party succumbs to the temptation of using its newly won strength to undermine the Turkish political system, instability could easily follow.

An Islamist Agenda?

Turkey’s stability and development in the coming half-decade are likely to be determined by which path the AKP chooses. The main question is whether the party truly has moved to the center or whether it will continue to push a quiet Islamist agenda to change Turkey’s secularist political system, as it has done for the past five years.

As noted above, AKP leader and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan purged his party lists of the most Islamist-leaning parliamentarians following the spring confrontation with the military. Most observers suspect this took place as a result of a quiet agreement between the prime minister and the military chief of staff. By doing so, the AKP explicitly moved into the center-right tradition of late president Turgut Özal. Nevertheless, a closer look at the AKP parliamentary group shows a continued dominance of individuals with clear Islamist credentials. Moreover, the same Islamist troika, consisting of Erdogan, Gul and former parliamentary speaker Bülent Arinç, continues to dominate the AKP and form a sort of inner cabinet where most decisions are taken. The party’s makeover is hence arguably superficial and the influence of the new, liberal parliamentarians over government policy doubtful.

Erdogan in fact faces a momentous challenge. He came out of the election victorious, but now confronts the task of laying the groundwork for stability and harmony in the country. Doing so will require sticking to the policy of moderation he has publicly espoused and standing up to demands from the party's Islamist core, which are likely to grow in ardor.

Many AKP advocates point to the fact that, during five years in power, the government passed few laws that could be considered as supporting an Islamist agenda. But during those years, the AKP government was checked by the office of the president, which was held by a staunch secularist and former chief judge, Ahmet Necdet Sezer. Putting forward any Islamist-leaning laws would in that context only have been foolish,

Elections promise the assertion of collective will and control over processes—economic, geopolitical, global—whose causalities are usually opaque and whose effects are often uncomfortable.

as Sezer would have been sure to strike those laws down with his veto power. Sezer did veto hundreds of personnel appointments put forward by the government, which he considered intended to Islamicize the country's bureaucracy by replacing secular-minded public officials with persons having an Islamist background.

Now, of course, the AKP itself holds the presidency. As such, there is no longer a constitutional force checking the party's agenda. With Gul in the presidency, the AKP's backbenchers and the informal Islamist forces that surround the party leadership are now likely to strengthen their demands for comprehensive reforms that roll back Turkey's secularist tradition and weaken the power of the Turkish "deep state," as the coalition of the military, high courts and civilian bureaucracy is often termed.

Whether Erdogan has the intention or the capacity to stand up to these demands is unknown. To make matters

more complicated, the AKP is likely to cloak any reforms it sponsors in terms of deepening democracy and adapting to European Union standards—a rhetoric that will be certain to please Europeans, appease Americans and placate internal opposition.

Here is another major paradox of Turkish politics, that democratizing reforms tend to favor Islamism. This is the case not primarily because of an innate Islamist leaning on the part of the population but because the reforms weaken the Turkish state in its relationship with society. This may appear to be a positive factor, given the obvious authoritarian tendencies and elitist views espoused by many representatives of the Turkish "deep state." And such reforms are likely to be positive in the long term, making Turkey an ever more suitable candidate to the EU. But this equation is questionable considering the dominance of an Islamist-minded political party, in turn a cause of the deep malaise of Turkish politics and the weakness of the secular opposition.

Paradox of Reforms

To sponsor an Islamic revival in Turkish society, the AKP need not necessarily sponsor Islamist legislation or reforms. Experience suggests such steps likely would erode the AKP's public support—since a majority of Turks are opposed to greater influence of religion on politics—and elicit a strong response by the military and its allied institutions, supported by the increasingly mobilized secularist elements of the population. This happened in 1997, when an Islamist-led coalition briefly held power, and again during the recent crisis over the presidential election.

Instead, to foster an Islamic revival, the AKP need only follow a three-pronged strategy. First, continue to promote democratizing reforms that weaken the state's ability to interfere with societal processes. This would be welcomed by the EU and would open opponents to the policy to criticism for supporting authoritarian or military

rule. Second, continue to replace state officials with Islamists, ensuring that a strong Islamist constituency remain in place even should the AKP lose power. Third, continue to encourage Islamist movements in society by providing moral support, selectively enforcing secularist laws and perhaps providing financial support. This combination of policies would gradually marginalize the power of secularist forces and make Turkey a more Islamic country.

Key among these developments are the comprehensive amendments to the Turkish constitution that are being launched. Along with other reforms, they redefine secularism to focus on individual rights, promoting the rights of believers rather than protecting the state from religion.

Utilizing the momentum of its landslide victory, the AKP appears set to include an amendment lifting the ban on Islamic headscarves in universities. Clearly the AKP hopes to benefit from the opposition's disarray by implementing such a reform without broader political dialogue, let alone a consensus. Given the importance of the headscarf issue as a symbol of Islamist politics, this will deal a blow to Turkey's secularism and potentially could be a destabilizing move.

These reforms, including the constitutional amendments, are ardently promoted by liberal intellectuals and welcomed by the West, since they make Turkey, on the surface, more European. And the transformation could go deeper if the AKP is honest about its transition into a secular political force—and if Erdogan manages to rein in the more Islamist forces within his party. Otherwise, it remains to be seen whether a weaker state will make Turkey more liberal and European or be a shortcut to making the country more Islamic, and thereby in the end more aloof from European values. That would be a paradoxical consequence of Western policies. ■

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