



Success of Turkey's AK Party must not dilute worries over Arab Islamists

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It has been unsurprising that since Abdullah Gul became president of Turkey on 27 August that much misguided analyses has been wasted on how "Islamists" can pass the democracy test. His victory was bound to be described as the "Islamist" routing of Turkish politics. And Arab Islamists - in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood, their supporters and defenders - were always going to point to Turkey and tell us that we've been wrong all along to worry about the Arab Islamists' alleged flirtation with democracy. "It worked in Turkey, it can work in the Arab world," they would try to assure us.

Wrong. Wrong. And wrong.

Firstly, Gul is not an Islamist. His wife's headscarf might be the red cloth to the bull of the secular nationalists in Turkey, but neither Gul nor the AK Party which swept parliamentary elections in Turkey in June, can be called Islamists. In fact, so little does the AK Party share with the Muslim Brotherhood - aside from the common faith of its members - that it's absurd to use its success in Turkish politics as a reason to reduce fears over the Muslim Brotherhood's role in Arab politics.

The three litmus tests of Islamism will prove my point: women and sex, the "West", and Israel.

As a secular Muslim who has vowed never to live in Egypt should Islamists ever take power, I never take lightly any attempt to blend religion with politics. So it has been with a more than skeptical eye that I've followed Turkish politics over the past few years.

But the 2004 reforms to Turkey's Penal Code which were passed by an AK Party-dominated parliament have been nothing short of miraculous. To appreciate how the AK Party has turned upside down Islamist notions on women and their rights to sexual autonomy - and thereby signaled its own distance from Islamism - consider the following, quoted from the European Stability Initiative (ESI) June 2007 report "Sex and Power in Turkey: Feminism, Islam and the Maturing of Turkish Democracy":

- All references to vague patriarchal constructs such as chastity, morality, shame, public customs or decency had been eliminated from the Penal Code.
- The new Penal Code treats sexual crimes as violations of individual women's rights and not as crimes against society, the family or public morality.
- It criminalised rape in marriage, eliminated sentence reductions for honour killings, ended legal discrimination against non-virgin and unmarried women, criminalised sexual harassment in the

workplace and treated sexual assault by members of the security forces as aggravated offences.

- Provisions on the sexual abuse of children have been amended to remove the possibility of under-age consent.

As well as highlighting the AK Party's willingness to traverse far beyond any Islamist notions of women's rights, the reforms also signaled the party's ability to listen and to work with Turkish civil society, particularly women's groups which so successfully lobbied and campaigned for the reforms that they have since emerged as influential political players in their country.

No wonder the ESI described the changes as revolutionary.

"It was not just a victory for Turkish women, but also for Turkish democracy," said the ESI, a Berlin-based non-profit research and policy institute. "With the new Penal Code, Turkey's legislation entered the post-patriarchal era."

In stark contrast, patriarchy stubbornly maintains its stranglehold on legislation in the Arab world, helped to no end by increasingly vocal Islamist groups which take it as a point of pride to stand in the way of legislation that would - God forbid! - boost women's rights.

In Kuwait, just ask women about the Islamist parliamentary deputies who until last year blocked legislation giving them the right to vote. In Jordan, ask women who but Islamist parliamentarians consistently reject moves to toughen sentences against honour crimes and who besides the Islamists opposes legislation granting women the right to divorce. And in Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood are the largest opposition bloc with 88 members, little attention is paid to women's rights.

Yes, Gul and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan both were members of the unabashedly Islamist Welfare Party which first entered the Turkish parliament in 1991 before it was ousted by Turkey's infamously secular army and subsequently banned from politics by the country's Supreme Court in 1997. But at the time of its demise, Welfare Party debates on women still centered on whether a man was permitted to shake hands with a woman. Now, both men belong to a party that has placed women as the equals of men

After authorities closed down the Welfare Party, Gul and Erdogan joined its successor, the Virtue Party, which in 2001 ended up splitting into two new parties. One was the AK Party, to which Gul and Erdogan called like-minded reformers, fed up with the traditional Islamist views of party elders.

While the Welfare Party used to emphasise that a woman's place was at home with her family, and while it didn't have a single woman among its 62 members of parliament when it first made it there in 1991 and while it continued to count not a single woman among its 158 deputies in 1995 when it was the largest party in the Turkish parliament, the AK Party followed a starkly different path on women. It had 71 founding members in 2001, of whom 12 were women (half with headscarves, and half without).

As the ESI report points out, the AK party programme avoided direct reference to Islam, proclaiming adherence to Turkey's secular traditions and promising to encourage women to participate in public life and be active in politics; to repeal discriminatory provisions in laws; to work with women's NGOs; and to "improving social welfare and work conditions in light of the needs of working women".

How was the AK Party able to pull all that off? Enter the "West", in the form of the European Union and Turkey's determination to join it. Gul himself has been a key player in promoting Turkey's ambitions to become a member of the pan-European bloc. As foreign minister, he helped secure European Union-accession talks for Turkey. And don't forget it was Gul who facilitated the defection of fellow moderates from the overtly Islamist Welfare Party

Internally, modern Turkish politics for decades now have been shaped by the secular vision of its founder Kemal Attaturk. In effect a fundamentalist mix of secularism and nationalism, Kemalism has created a Muslim majority-country where the army has toppled four governments since 1960 for being too religious; where women cannot wear headscarves in government buildings or public schools; and where writers and intellectuals can face jail time, or worse, if they dare to question Kemalist state tenets such as denial of the Armenian genocide and the systematic discrimination against the country's Kurds.

Kemalism might have made inroads in the metropolises of Turkey but it brought little comfort for the uneducated and poor women of the countryside whose lives continue to be determined by archaic codes of honour. While their urban sisters were forced to shun the headscarf as a divisive religious symbol, girls and women in the countryside were subject to arbitrary virginity tests and the death sentences of their families for the merest suspicions of violating family honour.

Legislation alone doesn't fix such problems of course - and Turkey must continue to improve its human rights record, particularly with regard to Kurds - but it's a start and it's a safety net for those who worry that the law leaves them vulnerable to Islamist machinations. And it's a start that puts Turkey miles ahead of the Arab world and its increasingly vocal Islamists.

In Egypt for example, the secular-in-name regime of President Hosni Mubarak has for years now fought the Islamist influence of the Muslim Brotherhood with a conservative and increasingly hysterical interpretation of Islam that is painful to watch. The regime has filled Egyptian television screens with conservative clerics whose views are shameful in a country that is home to al-Azhar, the Sunni bastion of learning which supposedly

prepares clerics from around the Muslim world to lead their flock.

Whereas Turkey has criminalized rape in marriage, in Egypt we witness ever more outlandish fatwas. Witness the breast-feeding fatwa which declared that unmarried men and women could be alone together in an office at work without violating Islamic law as long as the woman breast-fed her male colleagues five times. Or the urine fatwa in which the Mufti of Egypt wrote in a book, and then retraced after an outpouring of ridicule, that drinking the urine of the Prophet Muhammad was deemed a blessing.

Such an environment can never produce the monumental changes that propelled Gul and Erdogan from the Welfare Party to the AK Party.

The irony for Egypt is that a few years ago, several members of the Muslim Brotherhood did indeed try to engineer a similar movement to that Gul and Erdogan led away from traditional Islamism. The founders of the Wasat Party in Egypt say they left the Muslim Brotherhood after they became disillusioned with the authoritarianism of its Supreme Guide. They invited Christians to join them and applied for a license to operate as a political party. Their applications have repeatedly been rejected by the parliamentary committee which oversees the approval of new parties in Egypt. Not surprisingly, the committee is dominated by the ruling National Democratic Party. In other words, the government decides who can and can't be its legitimate opposition.

And the reason the Wasat party has consistently been blocked is quite simple - allowing a moderate Islamist party to function in Egypt would scuttle Mubarak's bogeyman scenario, the one in which he plays the good guy to the Muslim Brotherhood's bad guy and successfully scares his western allies into believing he is the only alternative to fundamentalist lunatics. It is a game that many Arab dictators successfully play.

Attitudes towards religion in Turkey and Egypt are likewise poles apart. According to the ESI report, a recent survey in Turkey shows Turks are becoming more religious in private - the number of people who say that they are 'very' or 'quite' religious increased from 31 to 61 percent between 1999 and 2006.

But the same survey shows that support for the secular state has grown stronger. In 1991, 21 percent of Turks polled said they supported Shariah (Islamic law), but that figure fell to 9 percent in 2006. Judging from the fuss over Gul's wife's headscarf - which will make her the first First Lady of modern Turkey to cover her hair - you would think that veiling was on the rise. In fact, the same survey shows the number of women appearing uncovered in public increased from 27 percent in 1999 to 37 percent in 2006. In Egypt, an estimated 80 percent of women now cover their hair in public.

The final litmus test of Islamists that the AK Party has scuttled is Israel. Turkey is a long-time ally of the Jewish state, much to the chagrin of many of its neighbours which behave as if it's a duty of every Muslim-majority country to hold the same stance on Israel as the frontline Arab states which have fought several wars against it. The AK Party has not given any indications that it will change Turkey's stance on Israel.

In an interview in June 2005, the Muslim Brotherhood's deputy supreme guide Mohammed Habib told me if the Muslim Brotherhood ever came to power they would put to a popular referendum the Camp David peace treaty that Egypt signed with Israel in 1979. It was the first peace accord between an Arab country and Israel.

"The Zionist entity has raped the land of Arabs and Muslims. Power is the only language that the Zionist entity understands. How can we recognize it (the treaty)? Who has recognized Camp David ? Have the people? We will put it to the people as a referendum of course. The people are the ones who decide and have the right to

determine this. If the people say no there won't be a treaty," Habib told me.

That fact that the deputy leader of a political organization would not, in the year 2005, even utter the name of another country was the least worrying aspect of his statement. Such a revisionist attitude towards internationally recognised treaties reflects both the recklessness and the stubborn denial of reality that has become a trademark of many Arab Islamists.

And there you have it - women, the West and Israel. The AK party happily fails the Islamist test on all three.