aulamediterrània
Programa Interuniversitari de l'IEMed.

n.129 26/10/2022

ARTICLE

NATIONALISM, ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY IN TURKEY

Umut Özkırımlı*

Introduction: A Model for the Middle East?

Despite initial skepticism regarding the results of November 3, 2002, general elections which saw the decimation of the incumbent coalition and veteran politicians such as Bülent Ecevit, Mesut Yılmaz, Tansu Çiller and Devlet Bahçeli by the newcomer Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey was soon hailed as a model for the rest of the Islamic world, an inspiring example of how Islam can be combined with secular democracy and market capitalism.[1]

But the optimism inherent in considering Erdoğan's Turkey as a model to emulate in a post-Arab Spring context proved to be short-lived, as demonstrated by a series of political crises including corruption scandals, country-wide protest movements, a failed military coup, the escalation of the conflict with Kurdish separatists, the societal polarization exacerbated by uncontrolled immigration, and, last but certainly not the least, brutal repression of all forms of dissent.

The failure of the Turkish model cannot be explained solely in terms of unrealistic expectations. The rapid deterioration of Turkey from what some commentators call "competitive authoritarianism" into full-blown authoritarianism is also a manifestation of a broader, global trend of what political scientists call "democratic backsliding".[2] As documented by Freedom House, 2021 marks the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom.[3] With a global freedom score of 32 out of 100, Turkey is categorized as "not free". In the *Global Democracy Index* report, made by the Economist Intelligence Unit's (EUI), Turkey is labelled as a "hybrid democracy", which is characterized by the following features: elections have irregularities that prevent them from being free and fair; corruption is widespread; the rule of law and civil society is weak; and media and the judiciary are not independent.[4]

* Senior Research Fellow, IBEI

[1] Ali Çarkoğlu, "Turkey's November 2002 Elections: A New Beginning?", *Middle East Review of International Affairs,* Vol. 6, No. 4, December 2002.

[2] Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism", *Journal of Democracy,* Vol. 13, No. 2, April 2002.

[3] Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2021,* available at https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege/countries-and-regions

[4] Ibid.

But how did Turkey get here? What accounts for the meteoric fall from grace of what was once considered a success story? To what extent is the deterioration of democracy in Turkey related to the global rise of authoritarianism? And how do domestic factors, notably nationalism and religion, factor in?

From Empire to the Nation-State

Modern Turkey emerged out of an imperial order that was based on a quasi-corporatist and collectivist system where the main line of demarcation was religious affiliation. The salience of religion was buttressed by the social and political organization of the empire into legally recognized, culturally autonomous religious communities, the *millet* system. This partially decentralized system granted some internal autonomy to Ottoman communities, but this relative autonomy did not amount to some form of multiculturalism *avant la lettre,* as some commentators have later argued.[5] On the contrary, the system guaranteed social and cultural segregation, regulating interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims and ensuring that intermixing was restricted.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire began to decline militarily and economically. The Young Turks, which took over the empire after the 1908 rebellion, joined World War I on the side of the Central Powers and collapsed in the subsequent defeat at the hand of the allies, which also led to the occupation of İstanbul and İzmir. The humiliation and the exigencies of this defeat triggered a profound psychological trauma for the Ottoman elites, and prompted the formation of a strong nationalist movement with a vision of a modern nation-state in the shape of republican Turkey. In 1922, after a successful military campaign against the victorious Western military forces that has later become the cornerstone of the foundational myth of contemporary Turkey, a newly founded parliament officially ended 623 years of Ottoman rule, and the following year "the Republic of Turkey" was created with Ankara as its capital and the charismatic war hero Mustafa Kemal (later bestowed with the surname Atatürk, or the "father of Turks") as president.[6]

Ruptures and Continuities

The founding elite was determined to distance the new state from its predecessor as it deemed a clean break with the Ottoman past necessary for its nation-building project. Post-imperial identity embraced Western modernity across the whole spectrum of daily life, from the mundane (the adoption of a new dress code, the introduction of the international Gregorian calendar, etc.) to the official (the replacement of the God-given sharia law by a civil code, the closure of religious convents, etc.), and it was premised on a number of foundational myths: of an embattled nation threatened by both internal and external enemies, of the need to prioritize the nation at the expense of individual and group rights and, ultimately, of democracy. Despite its claim to be all-encompassing, hence "civic", republican nationalism had a strong "ethnic" colour from the outset as it placed particular emphasis on culture, and privileged the dominant Turkish element.

[5] Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

[6] Umut Özkırımlı and Spyros A. Sofos, *Tormented by History: Nationalism in Greece and Turkey,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Their self-avowed commitment to modernism and secularism notwithstanding, the republican leadership was aware of the strength of Islam, and hence developed an instrumentalist and accommodationist attitude towards it, at least initially. This paradox of rejecting religion in principle yet embracing its potential in practice was to have a lasting legacy on social and political life. On the one hand, Islam, seen as a link with a past from which republican elites were trying to dissociate themselves, had to be symbolically downgraded. On the other hand, its appeal as a mobilizing force, a factor of social cohesion and a cultural resource for the new national narrative, not to mention its function as a boundary excluding what were deemed to be "non-Turkifiable" minorities, was hard to deny. The solution to this conundrum was to place religion under the purview of the state. Although in theory Islam was defined as a strictly private affair, in practice it was transformed into yet another state apparatus dedicated to the colonization of everyday life and the inculcation of a *statist paternalistic* logic. Contrary to the commonplace view that the establishment of the Republic banished Islam to the margins of Turkish social and cultural life, republican nationalism and its definition of Turkishness drew heavily on Sunni Islam, and the systematic process of "Turkification" the new elites embarked on involved measures that discriminated against non-Muslim minorities and subsequently heterodox Muslim minorities such as the Alevis. It can thus be argued that Islam, despite – or perhaps because of – its subsumption to the state, became a dominant ethnic and national idiom, a privileged and highly important signifier of Turkishness.

Nationalism and Islam

The transition of Turkey into multiparty politics in the 1950s marked the beginning of a new era which saw the transformation of Islam into a language of protest and discontent. Sects and religious orders re-emerged, influencing the agenda of opposition parties such as the center-right Democrat Party (DP), which, for example, promised the restoration of the Arabic call to prayers in response to popular demands. Despite the continued claims of the political elites that republican nationalism, in particular its secularist pillar, continued to constitute the guiding principle of the Turkish political system, the rehabilitation of religion by the Democrat Party became a prevalent feature of conservative politics which relied on Islam as a force for political mobilization.

State paternalism, which was reflected in the state's attitude towards Islam, was inspired by a mistrust of the very people whose sovereignty the Republic was supposed to represent. The imperative of building and consolidating a strong modern nation-state as well as the memories of the failure of earlier attempts at democratization meant that modernization was going to be selective and driven from above. This envisaged a strenuous process of social engineering, to enlighten the people and "save" them from the clutches of tradition, and the establishment of formally democratic, but in essence authoritarian, political institutions that would safeguard the unity and modernization of Turkey. Thus, in instances where democracy was considered to be testing the boundaries of accepted political behaviour, the national interest acquired priority over that of popular will, and was used to justify the frequent interventions in the democratic process.

The reintegration of Islam into definitions of Turkishness during the 1950s and 60s informed the so-called Turkish model until the end of the twentieth century, albeit kept in check by a formally secular state. During this time, Turkey was described as what several commentators called a

"tutelary democracy"[7], which was premised on the distinction between the nation and the people, and relied on the principle of the sovereignty of a transcendental subject, the nation. Individual and collective rights were always supposed to take second place to the national interest. In this visualization of modern Turkey, the nation was equated with an undivided people with a single sense of purpose. This entailed the "othering" of those who were believed to constitute a threat to national unity, be they non-Muslims, Kurds, Alevis or other minorities.

This binary divide between nation and people survived the demise of tutelary democracy and became one of the defining features of Erdoğan's rule. The earlier, more instrumental, synthesis of Islam and Turkishness has not been radically overhauled, even at the time when it appeared that the Islamist project managed to take over the republican-secularist state apparatus. True, Islam has emerged out of the margins, became more assertive and visible, yet still remained mainly a tool of mobilization and legitimation, still controlled and shaped by the state, which considers it part and parcel of its particular "national vision".

The "New Turkey"

Turkey's tutelary democratic system has indeed come to an end, but the particularities of political transition, notably the intense antagonism between the Kemalist-secular advocates of tutelary democracy and the alternative constellation of forces that found expression in, or even tactically supported, the AKP, have accentuated the authoritarian and populist characteristics of the latter. In this highly polarized context, the most robust contender for the succession of the *ancien régime* was a political system premised on a procedural conceptualization of democracy that treated competitive elections as the sole source of legitimacy and the expression of the national will. The war of maneuvers between the AKP and the military/state bureaucracy and other contenders for power was conducted in such a way that the AKP developed into a counter-institution displaying a lot of the characteristics of the opponents whose power it sought to eliminate – not only its national vision. The choices made reinforced centralizing tendencies within the party and facilitated the creation of a personality cult around its leader, Erdoğan. The party progressively established its own control over key institutions of the state apparatus and resisted calls for internal democratization. Somewhat ironically then, despite the downfall of the Kemalist state, its post-Kemalist successor, Erdoğan's "New Turkey", turned out to be a less secular replica of the old regime.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, I would argue that this was by no means a foregone conclusion. There were times, in particular in the first, *pragmatic,* phase of AKP rule, which lasted roughly until 2010, when hopes for the emergence of a truly democratic order were stronger. The AKP even launched an initiative to resolve the country's longstanding Kurdish problem, the so-called "democratic opening" process. It is true that the reforms the state undertook were more cosmetic than concrete; the process itself top-down, opaque and subject to the whims of two strongmen,

[7] Adam Przeworski defines tutelary democracy as "a regime which has competitive, formally democratic institutions, but in which the power apparatus, typically reduced by this time to the armed forces, retains the capacity to intervene to correct undesirable states of affairs." See for example Adam Przeworski, "Democracy as a Contingent Outcome of Conflicts", in Jon Elster and Run Slagstad (eds.), *Constitutionalism and Democracy,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Erdoğan and Abdullah Öcalan, the incarcerated leader of the Kurdish separatist PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan,* or the Kurdish Workers Party). Still, the ceasefire between Turkish armed forces and the PKK lasted more than two years, and many believed that the process was irreversible.

These hopes were dashed in 2013 when a peaceful sit-in held by environmental activists on May 28 to counter government plans to raze the Gezi Park in the symbolic Taksim Square escalated into a country-wide protest movement that was brutally suppressed by the state and its security apparatus. The fear that has been the hallmark of the second, *ideological,* phase of AKP rule has been exacerbated by the bitter feud between the government and the Gülen Movement, the deteriorating situation in Syria and the declaration of autonomy in Rojava (Northern Syria) by the PKK's sister organization the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and a series of terrorist attacks in various Turkish cities allegedly perpetrated by the Islamic State.

The simmering tensions boiled over when a small clique within the Turkish army attempted to topple the government on July 15, 2016, leaving 241 dead and an even stronger "strongman" behind. A state of emergency which gave extra powers to the government and the president was declared, and it was followed by an immense wave of arrests and detentions that extended far beyond those individuals allegedly linked to the Gülen movement, the "mastermind" behind the putsch according to the official narrative.

These developments could be read as the culmination of an extended process marked by an ambivalent attitude towards democratization. They could also be seen as a manifestation of wider, parallel tendencies in the world, the rise of authoritarian populism or what political theorist Sheldon Wolin refers to as "managed democracy", a term that can be usefully applied to Russia, India, China and, at the heart of Europe, Poland and Hungary.[8] In these cases, democracy ceases to be more than but a formal shell within which authoritarians can flourish in the name of national interest and unity.

Statist Communalism

It is commonplace to talk about Erdoğan's "New Turkey" in terms of "the return of religion" or the failure of top-down secularization in a predominantly Muslim society. But this does not capture the fundamental continuity between Kemalist and post-Kemalist Turkey. Erdoğan's unabashedly Islamist regime has more affinities with the modern-secular nation-state Mustafa Kemal and his associates were trying to build than its proponents are prepared to admit. It is authoritarian, state paternalist, based on a notion of strong leadership and the personality cult that goes with it, xenophobic and – at least at the rhetorical level – anti-Westernist. On the other hand, unlike its Kemalist forebear, the new authoritarian nationalism portrays Turkey as a regional power house, and the potential leader of the (Sunni) Muslim world – championing a particular interpretation of Islam

[8] The Turkish political system has been variously called "competitive authoritarianism", "majoritarian authoritarianism", "electoral authoritarianism". Here, I prefer to use the much broader term "managed democracy" – "the smiley face of inverted totalitarianism" – which Wolin defines as "a political form in which governments are legitimated by elections that they have learned to control" as it encompasses both Western and non-Western regimes, hence it is more comprehensive and less Eurocentric. Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.

that attempts to reconcile it with modernization and the inner workings of a capitalist market society. This was indeed the attractiveness of the so-called Turkish model: an ideal "Islamic democracy" that allows for both a version of Islam and an updated Kemalism, stripped of its rigid understanding of secularism.

Why did this model collapse so easily and so spectacularly? The answer to this question partly lies in one of the most enduring aspects of Turkish political culture, and the link between the old and the new, what I would call *statist communalism*. Turkey has always been (and still is) an archipelago of communities held together by fiat and when necessary by force. Yet this contrived unity did not produce a society of shared values and practices, let alone a nation with a sense of a common past and destiny. Statist communalism is predicated upon a strong, paternalist state, one that values communities, above all family, tribe and clan (*aşiret*), over individuals and civil society. This paternalist state is not egalitarian; it does not tend to increase social welfare, or protect individuals or groups against encroachments on their rights and entitlements. On the contrary, it is perceived as and acts like a "father", presiding over a hierarchical structure that promotes a form of communalism akin to the *millet* system of the Ottoman Empire.

The transition to full autocracy was so rapid and easy in Turkey, because it has no unified society held together by shared values; because each community is ready to form an alliance with the state to further its own interests, turning a blind eye to the predicament of other communities; because overcoming autocracy requires resistance, and resistance requires unity, but the various communities despise one another as much as, if not more than, they despise autocrats; because for every community, including that of the oppressed, the only route to salvation is to nurture a leader from among its own ranks and to replace the autocrat with its own leader, thereby taking control of the state mechanism.[9]

The Future?

We should be wary of the pessimism bred by the crisis rhetoric; it may indeed be that there is more democratic resilience in Turkey than is apparent at this moment. Today's crisis may turn into tomorrow's opportunity. And even if the crisis proves to be of a more permanent nature, reflecting on it will shed light on the global tension between, on the one hand, the nation-state as a secular democratic project organized around a community with clearly demarcated boundaries, and, on the other, more universalistic projects which rely on theocratic authoritarianism at home and expansionism abroad (as the Turkish army's recent interventions in Syria, Iraq, Libya and even Azerbaijan show).[10]

It is clear that a country as heterogenous and vibrant as Turkey cannot be held together by an autocrat who relies on a slim majority, no matter how fragmented the opposition is.[11] Either the

[9] Jenny White, "Spindle Autocracy in the New Turkey", *The Brown Journal of World Affairs,* Vol. XXIV, No. 1, Fall/Winter 2017.

[10] For a detailed discussion of the Kurdish question which forms a backdrop to Turkey's recent interventionism, see Umut Özkırımlı, "Multiculturalism, Recognition and the 'Kurdish Question' in Turkey: The Outline of a Normative Framework", *Democratization,* Vol. 21, No. 6, 2014 and Umut Özkırımlı, "Vigilance and Apprehension: Multiculturalism, Democracy and the 'Kurdish Question' in Turkey", Middle East Critique, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2013.

[11] Jenny White, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks* (updated edition), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.

country will be thrown into chaos and disorder, a scenario which cannot be tolerated by the international community given Turkey's pivotal role in the region and in various strategic alliances, or the opposition will finally decide to bury the hatchet, even if temporarily, and start acting together.

Needless to say, this does not require taking up arms or engaging in violence which would be tantamount to mimicking the regime. As Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan show in their award-winning book *Why Civil Resistance Works*, non-violent resistance campaigns are almost twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts.[12]

The answer to the Leninist question, "what is to be done", then, is not hard to come by. What is harder is to overcome statist communalism, to leave behind the bitter feuds and quarrels that stand in the way of an organized civil resistance.[13] This may require us, as one of the protagonists in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's unique *The Little Prince* puts it, to endure the presence of a few caterpillars until we become acquainted with the butterflies. Not a particularly heavy price, I would hazard, if this is indeed the only way out.

[12] Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works? The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict,* Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2012.

[13] See also Emre Caliskan and Simon A. Waldman, *The New Turkey and its Discontents,* London: Hurst and Co., 2016.