



The Turkish Model. Many Turks are wary even of “mild” Islamists -- with reason

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Why aren't more moderate Muslims protesting against Islamism? Actually, hundreds of thousands have been doing exactly that -- marching in the streets of Turkey's major cities to insist on strict separation of mosque and state.

To be sure, Turkey is unique. Though its population is 99 percent Muslim, its modern traditions are solidly secular. In recent days, millions of Turks have been as excited as “American Idol” fans over one of the country's most popular singers, Kenan Dogulu, winning fourth place in the Eurovision song contest. (Accompanied by scantily clad backup singers, Dogulu wowed audiences with his version of “Shake it Up Shekerim.”)

<http://www.eurovision.tv/addons/mediaplayer/video/tur.html>)

At Istanbul's Bahcesehir University, where I attended a more sedate gathering last week, an international forum on “The Role of Leadership in International Relations,” the Turkish flag, red with a Muslim crescent and star, is displayed alongside both American and Israeli flags. Can you imagine seeing that in Cairo or Jordan? Can you imagine seeing that at Oxford, the Sorbonne - or Harvard, for that matter?

Turkey straddles the borders between the West and the Middle East. A bridge literally connects the European and Asian sections of Istanbul. Turkey belongs to NATO: Its army is larger than that of any other

member of the military alliance except for the U.S. Its economy has become the 16th largest in the world.

The modern Turkish state arose from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, an ally of Germany defeated in World War I. Turkey's George Washington, the war hero Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (he led the Turks against the British at Gallipoli), continues to be revered – his sayings inscribed in public places, photos of him gracing not just government buildings but also private shops, restaurants and homes.

At the heart of the Kemalist vision is secular republicanism. But Islamism – the fusion of religion and political power – also has its adherents. Their numbers appear to be growing.

Turkey's current government is dominated by an Islamist party: the Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. And Erdogan's recent nomination of another member of the AKP for the presidency – which would give the party control of all branches of government for the first time – has distressed, frightened and angered secular Turks, whose political parties, though no doubt representing a larger percentage of the population, have been too fractious to form effective coalitions.

On April 27th, the army's general staff posted a memo on its website hinting it might step in, as it has four times in the past, to make sure that religion and politics are kept at arm's length. "It should not be for-

gotten that the Turkish armed forces takes sides in these debates and is the absolute defender of secularism," the memo read. "When necessary they will display their attitudes and actions very clearly." Critics of the military have called that a "cyber coup."

A few days later, Turkey's constitutional court annulled the first round of parliamentary voting for the president on procedural grounds. Turkey's judges worry that an increasingly Islamist government would threaten judicial independence, and would seek to replace civil law with Sharia, Islamic law.

Erdogan has called for new parliamentary elections in July. The mass demonstrations of recent days have highlighted the intensity of those who oppose him and the AKP. The demonstrators have been peaceful – and courageous. A bomb set off in Izmir, Turkey's third largest city, killed one person and injured more than a dozen. But more than a million people were in the streets the following day, including at least as many women as men.

Surprisingly – or perhaps not – much elite European and American opinion has sided with the Islamists and against the secularists. The *Economist* magazine, for example, recently ran an editorial saying that "if Turks have to choose, democracy is more important than secularism."

A thought experiment: If a majority of Americans voted for Christian fundamentalist politicians determined to dismantle the wall be-

tween church and state, would the *Economist* be equally supportive of their democratic mandate? If not, why the very different standard when the religion intruding into the political sphere is Islam?

Part of the explanation is the belief that the AKP is only a “mildly” Islamist party. But millions of Turks don’t trust Islamists, however “mild” they profess to be. Having experienced freedom, and looking around their region, they worry when they see the AKP pushing for “alcohol-free zones,” the criminalization of adultery, increased religious instruction in schools and separation of the sexes in public swimming pools.

They note the AKP’s increasingly friendly relationships with such groups as Hamas and its growing ties with Iran and Syria. They don’t want their country becoming, even gradually, more like Iran or Saudi Arabia.

“Democracy means more than just elections,” Dr. Suheyl Batur, the president of Bahcesehir University said in opening the leadership forum. “It also means guaranteeing basic rights and freedoms.”

Both Europeans and Americans have sometimes lost sight of that truth. Let’s hope the Turks, over the years ahead, remain in a position to remind us.

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