



Turkey Votes. The AKP may not be the same as Hamas, but their ideology does kill innocent people

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Turkey's reelection of incumbent prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP, or Justice and Development Party, has reenergized the low-level debate in Washington about foreign Islamic parties that claim to respect democracy and secularism. But for the AKP--no less than its rivals in the Turkish military and secular state structures--the positive element lacking in their outlook involves pluralism, more than either politics or prayers.

Turkey is now divided between two forms of intolerance: a secular element that only accepts Islam under strict state supervision, and a religious faction that similarly restricts its approval to Sunnism. Neither respects Turkey's minorities: the heterodox Alevi Muslims, who fear

the AKP because it excludes them; the Kurds, whose situation is dangerous for Iraq and the U.S.-led coalition there as well as Turkey itself; the small Greek Orthodox population, which suffers curtailment of its most elementary religious functions, or the Armenians, who still clamor for truth about the deportation and massacres they suffered at the end of the First World War.

Many American commentators would like to see "Islamic democratic" parties emerge across the Muslim world--notably in Egypt, with a presumed option of American accommodation with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Both Erdogan's AKP and the Egyptian MB (the latter having been the godfather of Hamas among the Palestinians)

talk the talk. They say they opt for ballots over bullets, and since voting and renouncing violence are the words Americans love to hear, the chance at supporting parties representing a "tame" Islamist ideology is attractive to many inside the Beltway.

In addition, the strident rhetoric and militaristic legacy of Turkish secularism seems to blame Islam as a faith for the problems of Turkish politics, which plays well with some sectors of Western opinion, but is a risky conception if the Western democracies intend to defeat radicals inside Muslim countries. Nobody serious on the side of freedom has suggested that the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq should make the eradication of Islam its strategic goal.

And finally, when they mark their ballots, many Turks vote for the AKP because after more than 75 years of enforced secularism, they are aggrieved at those who swore that driving religion from public life, and rooting out the old manners and morals of the Ottomans, would create a modern, efficient nation--but then failed to make good on their promises of accountability and prosperity. Turkey ended up with an army prone to violence, a police known for extreme corruption, and political bloodshed between leftist and rightist nationalists. Worst of all, the Turkish army holds on to its "right" to throw out governments of which it disapproves, which is hardly exemplary from the democratic viewpoint.

Having trusted secularists who delivered little, many Turks want to give religious believers a chance in government. And the AKP, in its electoral propaganda, asks for no more than an opportunity to administer the existing state in a more conscientious and clean manner. Its functionaries and apologists profusely deny any intent to introduce sharia law--a source of literal horror among many Turks--or otherwise expand the role of the mosque in Turkish life.

But will the "Islamic democrats" of AKP walk the walk? The question is acute in Turkey, because that country's combination of unstable factors means that no outcome can be certified as secure.

AKP supporters compare the movement with Christian-based parties in Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands, which have excellent records of fidelity to democracy--but also are products of compromises by and between the churches. The German Christian Democrats and Austrian People's Party arose in response to socialist labor movements, and recognized or adopted many of the programmatic principles of the left. The Dutch religious parties were born of a national reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants.

No such compromise between the AKP, the military, secular civilians, or, most important, religious and ethnic minorities, is in sight in Turkey, and, if anything, the common Turkish nationalist and Sunni-

centric habits of both the secular military and the AKP have become more aggravated.

Neither the military secularists nor the AKP will recognize the rights of the large Alevi minority, whose faith combines Shiism, Sufi spirituality, and ancient Turkish culture. Before the AKP came to power the secular Diyanet, or State Administration of Religious Affairs, built mosques and certified imams for the Sunnis, but refused money for the Alevis to build their meeting houses, known as *cemevi*, or to train their clerics. On that issue there is no difference between the secularists and the AKP.

Neither the military secularists nor the AKP has proposed to grant his traditional status to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Bartholomaeus I, representing Christian Orthodox believers and headquartered in Istanbul. The Patriarch is required to be a Turkish citizen, and has extremely limited official duties inside the republic. A Greek training seminary and publishing house have been closed. The secularists maintain this policy out of distaste for all religion, as well as Turkish nationalism. It is doubtful the Sunnis of AKP will rush to grant relief to the small community of Greek Christians.

Neither the military secularists nor the AKP has shown any interest in resolving the question of historical Armenian suffering in Turkey. The novelist Orhan Pamuk mentioned the Armenian events in writing and was threatened with a public trial--

by the AKP government. And finally, and most dangerously, neither the military secularists nor the AKP has indicated any willingness to concede ethnic rights to the country's large Kurdish population. Military-secular tradition holds that there are only Turks in Turkey, and that Kurds are all terrorist secessionists; anybody who defends the Kurds is labeled a Marxist extremist. Turkish troops have been sent to the border of Iraqi Kurdistan, and both the military and the AKP have adopted a threatening tone toward the U.S.-led coalition that may inevitably produce a shooting war. Both the military and the AKP have also fed growing anti-American propaganda.

The Sunni-centric politicians of the AKP may not be the same as Hamas, but their ideology does kill innocent people, as does the secular Turkish army. On a date never forgotten by Turkish and Kurdish Alevis, a Sunni mob attack on a hotel where an Alevi cultural event took place, in the city of Sivas in 1993, left some 37 people dead. After years of official atrocities against the Kurds inside Turkey, the Turkish army now fires artillery into northern Iraq. It is difficult to report accurately on the Alevis and Kurds, because Turkey systematically undercounts them. While official figures state that Turkey is 99 percent Sunni, Alevis make up from 20 to 33 percent of the population, depending on the source of population statistics, i.e. between 15 and 25 million people.

For Turkey to become a respected, modern nation, it is time for it to give up all forms of ideological politics: militaristic secularism, an ultranationalist definition of rights, and Sunni-centrism. Turkey needs a

government about which there will be no doubts, because it will stand above and seek to heal--rather than stand upon and aggravate--its dangerous differences. The AKP cannot provide such a government.