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“Turkey at the Verge of Europe: Challenges Ahead”

By: Merve Kavakci [former Member of Turkish Parliament]
George Washington University
mervesk@yahoo.com

Turkey, a non-Arab Muslim country with its historical significance among the Islamic civilizations holds a unique position within the democratization experiments undertaken in the Middle East region. In the aftermath of the tragic events of September 11 2001, with no respite Turkey was dubbed the moderate Muslim country by members of the Administration in Washington. Pundits on the Hill concurred that this ally country needed to be emulated by the rest of the Muslim world. This was not “news” to the Turkish, a long time ally of the United States in the region, only second to Israel. Perplexity, nonetheless, came with the new perception of the Muslim politicians in Turkey by Washington. Turkey’s conservative i.e. practicing Muslim politicians, once considered to be “threats” to the American friendly laic Turkish state’s edifice, and long perceived to be “Islamists” -prior to the attacks-, now have been promoted to be “Muslim Democrats”. This promotional transformation was predicated upon several factors from within and without.

The previous government of Turkey (1999) comprised of the leftist DSP (Democratic Leftist Party), centralist ANAP (Motherland Party) and the rightist MHP (Nationalist Populist Party) did an untenable, almost incorrigible job with respect to the economy, resulting in a two-year economic havoc. United States wanting to presume to have a strong ally in the region for its own interests, needed to do nothing but support the new government for a stable ally-Turkey.

The new Administration’s, namely AKP’s political savvy reverberating in its PR also held significance in the amelioration of its status. Unlike the previous government of 1997 with Islamic proclivities, which garnered neither support nor sympathy from Washington, AKP administration gauged its every action prior to implementing it while it kept a low profile, “under the radar” as long as it was deemed necessary. It abstained from quixotic confrontations, acquiesced to tactical concessions when it sensed even nominal discomfort from its adversaries, namely the secular fundamentalists under the patronage of the military.

AKP (Justice and Development Party), which assumed office with a landslide in November 2002 so far has wielded the aforementioned promotion of “Muslim democrats” quite sagaciously. It has been scrupulous in enhancing Turkish-American and Turkish-European relations via incessant and soaring dialogue, propounding Islam’s compatibility with democracy. AKP’s rapport with the West was crucial for another level, namely, its sustainable legitimacy. The party’s term in office and accomplishments

thereof could not have been simply predicated upon the “will” of the people. It was, rather, the kinds of “support” it would court in the international arena, and the “alliances” it could resort to against the potential attempts of overthrow by the deep state that were momentous for its future success.

Quaintly, with AKP in office for the last two-and-a-half years, Turkey has made more strides towards integrating to Europe than any other quasi-secular, pro-western governments that so far have reigned, refuting the trepidations and reservations of the past, voiced by the West concerning the practicing Muslim politicians in Turkey. AKP was simply hearing its peoples, striving to respond to the needs of its constituents while it was carrying Turkey closer to Europe. In other words, majority of the Turkish have believed that a more European Turkey had the answer to their problems. In addition to the invigoration of the civil society and the progression in the democratization of the “minds” processes, such stance of the Turkish, can be explicated by the dramatic shift of opinion vis a vis. European Union that took place between the polarized groups within the last decade. Conservatives, nationalists and the practicing Muslims who were opponents of European integration due to proverbial concerns up until early 1990s, overtime became the adamant supporters of EU membership. Turkey’s laic, in other words, pseudo secular, “Kemalist” elite who were known to be the proponents of democratization and Westernization for long, on the other hand, now were poised as the cardinal impediment to fulfilling democracy in Turkey, reprimanding the democracy endeavor undertaken by the Muslim democrats. This was a fray between “reform” and “status quo”. The elites who have long beguiled the Turkish by their aspirations of westernization, now that it meant the “cease” of the status quo which happened to be pretty propitious on their part, were turning against Turkey’s accession to European Union.

While the new Turkish administration is considered so far to be successful on Turkey’s long awaited embarking to meet the Copenhagen criteria, the threat of the bile of the consummate protectors of secular fundamentalism is still impending. Therefore, it is critical for AKP to pave its path in democratization rather diligently and yet carefully. Among the challenges ahead are establishing a system that will maintain the separation of powers, further bolstering the emergence of an invincible civil society, eliminating the clout of militaristic powers over the “elected” and raising the standards of human liberties equivalent to that of the West. Turkey’s function as the bridge builder between the two worlds, one of which it represents and the other that it hopes to be part of is of paramount importance at this juncture.

At the verge of integration to Europe, it is incumbent on AKP to aver that Turkey in fact can be both an Islamic and, at the same time, a democratic state and that the two are not antithetical to one another. In an attempt to pursue this goal, Turkey must do away with the impediments on the civil/human liberties and tackle with its unique ‘laic’ ideology that plays a significant role in sustaining political parochialism buttressed by the status quo. On a continuum of secularism between religious extremism on the far left and secular extremism on the far right, Turkey falls to the right of optimal secularism at the median where state and religion both do not intervene with one another. In other words, Turkish secular tradition does not permit religion’s sway over state affairs but does countenance the latter’s meddling over the former. The ban on the headscarf in public and, at times, in private realm is the most ostentatious manifestation of such “far to the

right” secularism. Furthermore, the provision that mandates inequality with respect to the graduates of the Imam Hatip Religious State Schools at the Central University Examination and the law that bans the teaching of the Holy Book of Qur’an to the children under the age of 12 are among the reverberations of the staunch Turkish secular ideology. This unique construct of secularism espoused by the state is distinct from the secularism adhered in the Western world. While the Turkish state adamantly refrains itself from the clout of religion over the state affairs, overtime, it shifts towards the “other” extreme, namely, secular fundamentalism. While it fervently rejects the concept of “religious state”, it falls into the aberration of creating a “**state**” religion. Due to this very fact, the Turkish religious authority, Diyanet is a state institution and the religious leaders, namely imams are federal employees.

The conceptualization of such unique construe of secularism must ostensibly be overhauled in the process of integration to European standards of governance. It must be reexamined through open discourse and must be brought from where it is at the far right to where it is supposed to be on that continuum. This is a sine qua non for the emergence of a full-fledged democratic Turkey. A democratic Turkey will then be rendered role model in the region, contributing to the elimination of the quandary between the two worlds, namely the West and the Muslim world, with respect to democracy’s elicitation in the latter.

Merve Kavakci is a former Member of Turkish Parliament and adjunct professor of Culture and International Affairs at George Washington University.