Democracy, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey

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The “Turkish Model” in the Matrix of Political Catholicism

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For a long time, especially the first two decades after World War II, the Kemalist model, epitomized by the establishment of a secular nation-state in 1923, was hailed as one of the most successful models for modernization. In recent years, this first “Turkish model” has faded away and a new one gradually has taken its place. This “new Turkish model” is based on the combination of moderate Islamism, liberal reforms, and democratic consolidation.

In this chapter, I ask two questions. First, what exactly does this new “Turkish model” consist of and what explains its emergence? Second, is it an outcome associated with causes that are idiosyncratic to Turkey, or can it be thought of, instead, as a generalizable manifestation of a broader political phenomenon? I argue that the Turkish model represents a particular type of interaction between religiously rooted politics and a process of liberalization and democratization. Although there are many elements that are specific to Turkey, I point out that this is not a new phenomenon. Rather, it shares several elements with an earlier and largely forgotten process of religious mobilization that took place in nineteenth-century Europe, epitomized by Catholic mobilization, the precursor of modern Christian Democracy.
What Is the “Turkish Model” and What Explains Its Emergence?

Since 2002, Turkey has been governed by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), a political party that has been described as both “pro-Islamic” and “Islam-friendly.” The AKP’s birth was not easy: it emerged from the ashes of another Islamist party, the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi), which was banned by the Constitutional Court in 2001. It is worth noting that the AKP’s founder and leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was imprisoned for “inciting hatred and enmity” and barred from running for the parliamentary elections of November 2002. Indeed, this is a party with religious roots that has challenged the type of secularism prevailing in Turkey and has sought to give religion a more prominent place in Turkish society. At the same time, several scholars have noted that the AKP also has been the vehicle through which a new class of upwardly mobile economic entrepreneurs with strong ties to the provincial towns and villages of Anatolia have mobilized the language of religion and Islamic identity to demand a bigger role in political affairs. Seen from this angle, Islamic identity has acted more as a “lubricant” for mobilization than as its deeper cause.

There has been a long and heated discussion about the exact place and meaning that religion holds for the AKP. It is clear, however, that the AKP has challenged the forceful secularism that came to be the cornerstone of Kemalism, and that it has been at the forefront of an effort to articulate a version of Islamic identity that reconciles it with social and political modernity. In spite of its Islamist coloration, the AKP has never attempted to implement a radical, anti-system set of policies that would undermine (rather than mitigate) the secular character of the Turkish state and challenge its democratic institutions. On the contrary, it can be argued that it has deepened these institutions by implementing a set of liberalizing political reforms mainly contained in the so-called harmonization packages, which were initially intended to satisfy European Union (EU) integration criteria. Despite ups and downs, these reforms have resulted in a marked reduction of the role of the military in politics. It is in retrospect quite clear that the AKP has put Turkey on a path leading to a more liberal and democratic future. In other words, this party, with its “pro-Islamic and anti-Western roots, has ironically played a historically important role in consolidating democracy in Turkey and integrating Turkey into the EU.”
In turn, this process of political transformation has had a significant impact on the party itself. The party's identity and political discourse have shifted toward a more pronounced emphasis of themes such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law—the AKP has been "metamorphosed," concludes Berna Turam.\textsuperscript{10} Indeed, this transformation has elicited apprehension among the more hard-core elements of the party, who see it as "having moved away from its ‘roots and habits’ towards ‘mundane vocations and expectations.’"\textsuperscript{11}

All in all, then, the combination of Islamist moderation and the deepening of democratic institutions justifies references to a new "Turkish model," one characterized by a process of twin political transformations: of the state and of the party. Turam explains these transformations as the outcome of a "politics of engagement" between the two.\textsuperscript{12} And yet this is more of a description than an explanation. The real challenge consists of explaining the emergence of this "politics of engagement," which entails a type of strategic interaction whereby the outcome may be systematically optimal irrespective of the initial preferences of the actors involved.

It is well known that the Turkish state had harbored a strong distaste for religiously rooted mobilization in politics; it has also been able to send clear signals about the cost of such anti-system politics.\textsuperscript{13} This was the case, most notably, with the so-called soft military coup of 1997, which resulted in the banning, the following year, of the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) and, in 2001, of the Virtue Party. The interaction with the state shaped an entire generation of Islamist politicians, who came to interpret the Refah debacle in particular as a waste of resources, opportunities, and hope. As a result, they came to discard the "essentialist and dogmatic" aspects of the Refah discourse, with its pronounced anti-system and anti-secular attitudes, and embarked instead on a pragmatist course of action by promoting "a discursive denial" of their "Islamist pedigree" and the adoption "of a moderate and non-religious discourse in its place."\textsuperscript{14} This was true for both Erdoğan, whose trajectory went from confrontational to cooperative positions, and for Fethullah Gülen and his grassroots movement.\textsuperscript{15} Gamze Çavdar summarizes this process by describing it as one of political learning;\textsuperscript{16} there is little doubt that it has been motivated by strategic considerations about costs and rewards. At the same time, it also must be recognized that the guardians of the Kemalist order got pulled into an incrementalist process from which it quickly became too difficult to remove themselves.\textsuperscript{17} A key reason is undoubtedly the "shadow presence" of the European Union.\textsuperscript{18} The
European integration process constrained the state elites in how far they could go with repression, while simultaneously supplying the AKP with a convenient set of benchmarks for institutional reforms that constrained the power of the traditional power centers, and especially the military.19

Is the “Turkish Model” Idiosyncratic?

What has been happening in Turkey since 2002 contains several elements that are specific to it; after all, Kemalism was distinctively Turkish. Nevertheless, this process is hardly unique to Turkey when viewed in the context of a broader historical perspective.

I have argued elsewhere that the relevance of political Catholicism extends beyond the boundaries of the European nineteenth century and that it is especially pertinent today.20 Formulated in ideal-typical terms, what I call the “Christian Democratic experience” embodies the trajectory of a mass political movement, primarily Catholic in its confessional orientation, which emerged in an institutional context that was not yet fully democratic, with the aim of challenging the liberal and secular character of European political modernity. In many ways successful, this movement ultimately contributed to the consolidation of the modern liberal democratic order. In fact, so effective were European Christian Democratic parties in reinforcing the political order they initially challenged that they ended up completely forgetting their anti-liberal political origins. Told in a nutshell, and coupled with the parallel Social Democratic experience,21 this is the story of the astonishing capacity of democratic institutions to absorb their enemies, while expanding. But is it reasonable to extend the Christian Democratic experience to non-European and non-Christian contexts, and especially the Muslim world? A closer look into that experience helps address this question.

The Catholic politics of Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century can be boiled down to five key elements: (1) mass mobilization, (2) an anti-system political discourse, (3) the combination of an appeal to religious sensibilities coupled with a political message of economic inclusion, (4) the modernization of religious practices, and (5) the ultimate moderation of Catholic parties and the democratization of the political institutions within which they operated.

First, the mobilization of European Catholics took on a pronounced grassroots character, initially located outside the narrow political arena and
within what we would call today civil society. The collective action problem was solved through the deployment of a wide range of selective incentives centered primarily around the effective, local provision of a variety of services, ranging from social services (hospitals, clinics, legal-aid societies), economic activities (banks, credit and investment houses, insurance companies), or educational initiatives (schools, child-care centers, youth camps)—all widely publicized by dense networks of religious publishing and broadcasting. Catholic activists were able to build real counter-societies (known as “subcultures” or “milieux”), which were later incorporated into the Catholic political parties. In the process, they were also able to set examples of successful management, typically contrasted to the ineffective or corrupt state efforts.

Second, religious mobilization in Europe relied on an “anti-system” discourse—where “anti-system” does not necessarily correspond to “revolutionary.” The Catholic movement criticized existing political institutions and their underlying secular and liberal character without, however, calling for a revolution. Today, the association between Catholicism and democracy appears to be so natural that a mention of the deeply liberal character of their precursor movements comes as a great surprise. And yet, even a cursory look at the infamous Syllabus Errorum, pronounced by the pope in 1864, gives pause. There, the pope denounced concepts such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of conscience and religion, the legal equality of cults, the sovereignty of the people, the doctrine of progress, the separation of state and church, liberalism, and the modern conception of civilization. He condemned as a grave error the belief that a regime that did not repress the violators of Catholic religion could be good. This critique of the liberal and secular order was crucial in energizing and mobilizing the Catholic masses across Europe.

Third, religiously oriented appeals combined with the activation of new social cleavages centered around the political mobilization of primarily petit bourgeois, urban and rural sectors that felt politically excluded and economically marginalized. This is why, and in contrast to socialist mobilization, Catholic movements became primarily cross-class movements. The social heterogeneity of the emerging parties reflected their cross-class basis; their ability to weave together disparate, or even competing, social groups became their linchpin, one that affected their political platforms for many decades. Viewed from this perspective, religion provided a language for the articulation of political and economic claims.
Fourth, Catholic mobilization in Europe did not just activate traditional religious identities. Rather than advocate only a return to premodern practices of religion, as often portrayed by their political adversaries, Catholic movements updated and modernized what it meant to be religious. For example, the revival of piety that took place in the context of this mobilization was accompanied by what at the time were modern forms of political activism that ended up undermining the traditional relations both between clergy and laity and between higher and lower clergy. Seen from this perspective, Catholic mobilization was not a mere manifestation of religion in politics; it amounted to a long-term transformation of religious practices.

Finally, the anti-liberal dimension of Catholic mobilization was eventually toned down and effectively reversed, once Catholic parties became integrated into the political systems of their countries. While these parties moderated, they contributed to the democratization of their countries. New political and social groups were integrated into the liberal institutions, and both political moderation and democratic institutions acquired a self-enforcing dynamic that had been lacking up to that point. What is remarkable is that this outcome was achieved less as a result of a process of independent ideological adjustment and more out of self-interested actions resulting from the process of political participation: democracy made democrats, rather than the other way around.

The emergence of Islamist movements in the Muslim world supplies us with many parallels to the Catholic political revival in nineteenth-century Europe, in spite of its variation across countries. The Islamist movement constitutes a recent and modern phenomenon that became a potent political force during the 1970s and 1980s, primarily through the channel of mass mobilization. Using both mosques and modern communications technology to propagate their message, several Islamist movements crafted an electoralist strategy (where this option was available to them) and combined it with a grassroots strategy, weaving the fabric of a veritable counter-society based on a variety of local groups. In turn, this mass mobilization was based on a critique of authoritarian practices and corruption, but also the spread of secular and Western ideas. Searching for the social bases of this discourse, one uncovers broad social coalitions that range from the urban poor to the middle classes, and that encompass small businessmen, low-level state functionaries, shop owners, lawyers, and teachers. Furthermore, most Islamist movements do not just advocate a return to traditional religious practices. They have blended new and modern forms of orga-
nization based on the primary role of social and political action in urban settings with selected elements of Islamic tradition. The striking parallels between nineteenth-century Catholic mobilization and contemporary Islamist mobilization echo Ahmet Kuru and Alfred Stepan's critique of essentialist generalizations about the supposed impact of Islam on politics.\textsuperscript{23}

In spite of the striking parallels between Catholic and Islamist movements, a key difference immediately jumps out. Especially in the Middle East, Islamist movements appear to have failed to transform themselves and to transform the political systems in which they emerged. On the one hand, many Islamist movements have radicalized rather than moderate; on the other hand, most of these political systems have become even more autocratic. Obviously, this outcome is overdetermined: unlike western Europe, which was engaged in a process of democratization, many Muslim countries were autocratic to begin with; unlike western Europe, which was industrializing, many Muslim countries appear mired in political and economic stagnation; European countries also lacked the legacy of colonization that shaped many Muslim countries; and despite a rhetoric that could be bombastic, Catholics did not stray away from peaceful politics—there was no Catholic equivalent of violent jihadism.

Nevertheless, at the core of the difference between Catholic and Islamist movements lies the absence of even a limited democratic option in many Muslim countries: competitive elections have been unavailable.\textsuperscript{24} It is this absence, equivalent of the use of a stick without a reward, that has often fueled a vicious cycle whereby Islamist movements radicalize and authoritarian regimes justify further repression. Herein, I think, lies the broader significance of the Turkish case. As in the European case, the Turkish state credibly foreclosed the most radical options while allowing for a democratic opening that in turn spun off a virtuous cycle of Islamist moderation and democratic transformation based on mutual revision, adaptation, and accommodation.\textsuperscript{25}

This raises the question of whether the Turkish model can be generalized to the rest of the Muslim world. Some authors have argued that the Turkish experiment cannot be replicated in other Muslim countries because either Turkey is seen as possessing a uniquely accommodating Muslim culture or Atatürk's heritage of authoritarian modernization and the secularist republic is equally unique.\textsuperscript{26} Once, however, the Turkish model is juxtaposed to the European Catholic experience of the nineteenth century, it ceases to appear unique or totally idiosyncratic.
Keeping in mind that the situation in Turkey retains a degree of fluidity, here is, then, the core message conveyed by the new Turkish model: liberalization, democratization, and inclusion are more likely where states provide rewards for moderation while sanctioning anti-system behavior, and where Islamist movements are included in the competitive political arena as players with a real chance of achieving a lasting political impact. Given the exciting possibility of an Arab democratic spring, Turkey reminds us that a combination of sticks for extremism and rewards for participation offers a path toward the construction of new democracies.

Notes


7. Ibid., 6.
8. Joost Lagendijk, "Turkey’s Accession to the European Union and the Role of the Justice and Development Party" (chap. 7, this volume).
10. Turam, Between Islam and the State, 139.
12. Turam, Between Islam and the State, 134.
15. Turam, Between Islam and the State, 135.
17. On the specific modalities of this process, see William Hale and Ergun Özbudun, Islamism, Democracy, and Liberalism in Turkey: The Case of the AKP (New York: Routledge, 2009).
19. Lagendijk, “Turkey’s Accession to the European Union.”
Setting out to win Egyptian hearts and minds for an austere Islamic state and society, Hasan al-Banna's Society of Muslim Brothers was instead irrevocably transformed into a flexible political party that is highly responsive to the unforgiving calculus of electoral politics. The Muslim Brothers have left no political opportunity untapped, plunging with gusto into the vote-seeking game, pushing other political forces and the state to take seriously what began as a farcical margin of electoral competition in the 1970s. The case of the Ikhwan confirms that it is the institutional rules of participation rather than the commandments of ideology that motivate political parties. Even the most ideologically committed and organizationally stalwart parties are transformed in the process of interacting with competitors, citizens, and the state. Ideology and organization bow to the terms of participation.” (“Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers,” 390)

