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Islamic Politics, Arab Spring and Turkish Model

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THE DILEMMA OF POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY IN THE MIDDLE EAST
POWER FROM OR TO THE PEOPLE?

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6. **Islamic Politics, Arab Spring and Turkish Model**

*Mehmet Ozkan*

**Introduction**

Islamic politics is an endeavor to shape the destiny of its own while the persisting theories and geopolitical power configurations continue to argue otherwise. The Middle East has always been the centre of this very Islamic politics especially from the 19th century when modernization and colonization started to take place in the region. Each structural change in global politics has added a new dimension to this phenomenon. The latest of this has been the Arab Spring since December 2010, but most effectively since the 25 January process in Egypt.¹

The Arab Spring and managing its direction is the most critical challenge for the Islamic politics – perhaps it will continue to be so in coming decades. As the developments unfold, both regional and international players have taken different approaches to the region and even some of them have fluctuated in their position with regard to developments on the ground.² Despite the failing account of the West in terms of defending values in the region – as in the case of 3 July 2013 coup d’état in Egypt – there are emerging examples in terms of doing politics without being anti-western and modern. One such example, the Turkish experience has been pointed as a possible direction by many in the region and beyond. This has enriched the debate; however, without contextualizing the current developments within the broader Islamic politics, there will be always some missing pieces in the puzzle. Taking up this challenge, this article intends to debate and periodize the modern Islamic politics, then to discuss the Turkish experience for the Middle East and the Third World.
Islamic Politics in the 21st Century

Following the July 3 military coup d’état in Egypt, the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, leaping at the opportunity, made a statement claiming that the developments in Egypt were a reflection of the exploitation of religion in politics. Although this is not a meaningful statement by itself, it was a sign of re-appropriation of the classical Western approach in the region. After the coup in Egypt, the West has avoided describing the conflict in the axis of Islamism; however, recent developments in the region have brought along serious debates in the West and among the Islamists over the way of conducting politics in the Middle East. How should Islamic politics be read in the context of the latest developments? My argument is that Islamic politics arrives at a critical turning point due to the crucial event in the three key countries of the region: Turkey, Iran and Egypt.

Legacy of the Past

The modernization and secularization movements in the early 20th century commenced almost simultaneously in these three key countries of the Middle East. Their radical and top-to-bottom experiences generated alternative approaches and oppositions in each of these respective countries. While Islamic opposition groups shared common ground, they attempted to affect power or to be in power by adopting different strategies. Following the 1979 Revolution, the Islamic movement came to power in Iran. Egypt experienced this only after the 2011 Popular Revolution. However, Morsi’s term as President was interrupted by the military coup at the end of the first year of the Muslim Brotherhood in power. Turkey, on the other hand, followed a different path. The democratization process transpiring in the republic since 1950 transformed the Islamic movement in Turkey. In this case, the movement did not radicalize because it successfully carved a space for itself within the political system even though it was arguably limited.

Despite all these different practices, when it comes to doing politics, the Islamist actors in these three countries have begun to share the same fate as of June 2013. Hassan Rouhani was elected president in Iran; the
Gezi Park protests took place in Istanbul, Turkey; and the military coup followed in Egypt on July 3. These developments should be read as the beginning of a new turn in Islamic politics. This new period is forcing a generation of more comprehensive, sophisticated and holistic politics for Islamists. Before examining the main elements of this new period, it is useful to contextualize the transformation of Islamic politics since the 20th century.

The 20th century can be evaluated roughly in four categories in terms of Islamic politics. The chief one of these is the first quarter of the 20th century in which politics was done reflexively to defend material-spiritual values against the Western colonial power. Due to the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire and deepening influence of colonialism in the Muslim world, Islamic politics embodied a reactionary tone.

Following the losses along the process, the second quarter of the 20th century, which may be regarded as the second period of the century, was a black period for Islamic politics. Muslims were not represented at the state level and pushed outside politics. Due to this alienation the movements prioritizing the protection of Islamic lifestyle and education were born. This was the main reason for the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 in Egypt. Similarly Turkish Islamic movements had no choice but to withdraw to the underground in the 1930s and the 1940s and adopt rather introverted policies because of the harsh conditions of the time to preserve the Islamic lifestyle.

After the World War II, Islamic politics entered its third period where Islamic actors, slowly but surely, regained a momentum and began to resurface in the political arena. The establishment of Pakistan as an Islamic state, as well as Turkey’s transition into democratic with the Democrat Party period, and most importantly the formation of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 1969 were the first signs of Islam’s appearance in the political sphere. The fourth period was rather a testing phase for the awakenings of the previous periods. In this last period, which is the fourth quarter of the 20th century, the National Outlook tradition came to power in Turkey, as Algeria and Sudan more or less experienced their first Islamic political administrations. However,
the Establishment both in these countries and in the West could not tolerate the situation; thus, their political presence were halted either by dragging into a bloody civil war, as in Algeria, or political instability. These experiences galvanized the role of the Islamic movements and gave birth to the fifth period.

In this phase, the Islamic actors came to the fore with an emphasis on democracy rather than religion, and adopted a rather liberal tongue in their discourse. It was a successful period in terms of political leadership experience. Especially, the success of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) in Turkey blazed a trail in the debates over the Islam-democracy harmony and became a source of inspiration for the Islamic movements in the region. Just as it was considered to be a successful period, a positive viewpoint regarding the future of the region formed in concert with the positive impact of the Arab Spring.

However, first the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, Turkey, and then the military takeover in Egypt, created the need to re-evaluate the Islamic movements’ way of doing politics. Again in the same period, Iran, which is pressurized by the international community, elected a religiously conservative but moderate leader as its new President; and this signaled that Iran too will try to change the way of doing politics, at least rhetorically.

In terms of the developments transpiring in these three countries, the period of May-July 2013 was one where the fates of all Islamic political groups coincided, just as was the case in the beginning of the 20th century. Turkey, Egypt and Iran will of course follow different experiences in relation to their own historical processes. However, they currently share a common challenge as of now and that is the emerging reality of the insufficiency of coming to power through elections alone. The challenge is no longer winning the elections, rather to be able to produce and implement the policies effectively. What I mean by this is that governance at political level does not automatically translate into socio-economic domination or influence. This, of course, does not mean to overlook domestic processes and troubles unique to each country, but it is crucial to find the main vein of Islamic politics.
Characteristics of the New Period

One should clearly see in this new period that the West still does not trust the political actors holding Islamic traditions in the Middle East, and it does not know how to interact with them effectively either. It is unlikely to foresee a change in Western attitude towards these groups in the short term. As such, it is perhaps the responsibility of these Islamic groups to find a new political language, style and strategy in order to participate in national political leadership and sharpen their presence for political sustainability. A key factor in this reform should be applying a much needed inclusive approach to their style of governance.

This inclusiveness has two dimensions. First is the visibility and implementation of a comprehensive political attitude because the majority of the time, inclusiveness is quickly noticed by people in very personal and real matters. As such, by merely applying a more inclusive approach, it will be felt by people and generate a greater affinity. The second is related to the use of a formative/distinctive language on wide ranges of issue in efforts to control discourse that shapes the formation of politics. If the 21st century is an age where people mostly are informed or have shaped their viewpoints via the 140 character tweets on Twitter and via some sort of perceptions, then the management of these perceptions becomes one of the most important elements. This has been shown clearly in the aftermath of the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, and it has become a must for Egypt since the 25 January.

The second most important element of the new style of Islamic politics is prioritizing to develop the capability and means to implement a new type of politics that cannot only effectively use the political gains, but also shape the content, formation and the future of the politics within the country. From now on, if an Islamic movement is actually interested in governing rather than simply being “in power” politically, implementing what I call as muqtader politics is a must. What I mean by this is that not only focusing on getting to power by elections alone, but intensifying and prioritizing the policies that shape the social and economic dimensions of the politics. The recent developments in the region have clearly showed that nothing is guaranteed even if one comes
to power by winning 50 percent of the votes; unless the top 50 richest men are conscientious and decent natives who do not take orders from anybody or any place. It is clearly seen that a political gain through ballots cannot shape and govern the social-economical dynamics unilaterally. Indeed, voting does not hold significance by itself.

**Assertive and Comprehensive Politics**
From this perspective, perhaps the real objective of the political actors having Islamic tendencies from now on should be influence over social-economic elements rather than coming to power through election processes alone. This is valid for the three key countries (Turkey, Egypt and Iran) of the region. Despite the fact that Islamic actors have been in power in Iran since 1979 Revolution, they have neither achieved inclusiveness nor shaped the social-economic order in the country. In a political sense, being in power is a serious gain since the Revolution, but it has somehow started to lose its value over society. In Turkey, the AK Party, after being in power for the last ten years, has seen through the Gezi Park protests that they are not really dominating the social-economic dynamics. This has been crystal-clear in the case of Egypt, where a democratically elected President has been ousted unreasonably by the military.\(^\text{12}\) It is seen that there is no guarantee to maintain the rights claimed with the popular support.

In this framework, the developments that took place in 2013 have shown that the Islamic political actors from now on will assure political gains if and only if they achieve/demonstrate to have muqtader politics. Islamic politics has not come to an end, as Assad claims, but has faced the necessity of generating a new style. This new style should neither be defensive nor apologetic. On the contrary, it should be as assertive, as inclusive and as comprehensive as it can be. This is the fundamental point that the developments in the Middle East highlight.

**Turkish Model and Islamic Politics**
Although literally it might sound very true, in more than three decades, after the existence of Islamic-oriented National Order Party in 1969,
Turkish politics has been analyzed by many as if the Islamists are trying to get into power on the one hand, the secularists or state elite with the help of military is keeping the country’s orientation toward the west in order to protect Turkey as a secular state on the other.\textsuperscript{13} This image of Turkey, mostly established such contradictory analysis of Turkish domestic politics, has created more confusion to understand Turkey and its policies rather than contributing to understand as initially aimed.

An Islamist versus secularist understanding of Turkey has accelerated since the Refah Party entered the parliament as the biggest party after getting more than 21 percent of the votes in 1995 general election. After becoming coalition partner in 1996-97 with the True Path Party with the Refah leader Necmettin Erbakan as Prime Minister, Turkish political analysts have triggered the debate on Islamists versus Secularists. Although Erbakan was ousted from power with a “postmodern coup” in 1997, such debates never ended in academic and political circles.

However, with the coming of the AK Party, a split up from Islamist Refah Party, to power in 2002 with an absolute majority in the parliament, the discussions have focused on two issues. One is just to update the earlier debate regarding the secret intention of AK Party, if any, to move Turkey towards the Islamic world and the future of secular Turkey. The second debate has focused mainly on the modelhood of Turkey for the Middle Eastern countries, because of Turkey being a secular and democratic country with a Muslim population.\textsuperscript{14} AK Party’s coming to power has actually created a quiet, mild transition that is nevertheless radical in terms of its consequences.\textsuperscript{15}

The analysis of Turkish politics as a clash between Islamists and Secularists is deeply flawed. Such an approach is neither helpful to understand Turkey fully nor advance the debate when it comes to its modelhood, if there is one. In Turkey, the main clash has always been between centre and periphery, rather than Islamist and Secularist. Islamist and Secularist positions just happened to represent centre and periphery, respectively, hindering the real conflicting sides. Turkey needs to be analyzed from the centre-periphery perspective and the Turkish model
should be looked at as Turkey’s normalizing of its domestic politics between centre and periphery.

**Defining the Centre and the Periphery in Turkey**

It is understandable that certain degree of cultural difference and distance between the elite (centre) and masses (periphery) in all societies due to historical, economic and political reasons might exist. However, such a distance between the centre, the secularist elite, and periphery, pious masses in Turkey has been particularly wide in the Republican area. From the outset, the founders of the Turkish Republic were unable and often unwilling to establish effective channels of communication with the Anatolian-based periphery. They were remembered only when the votes were needed, during which most of the time the center resorted to use ‘traditional and religious symbols’ to win the hearts and minds of periphery. Such strategy was temporary and was never able to establish a solid line between the two or to create an ideology of ‘the popular mind’.

As correctly argued, it is important to keep in mind that the cultural distance between ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ was an important polarity even during the Ottoman period in political and economic life. In short, the centre consisted of the civil, military and religious bureaucracy representing the state apparatus with the Sultan at the top, while the periphery included the local notables, peasantry and ordinary people. However, in order to grasp fully the change with the Republican Turkey, one needs to remember the state-society relations during the Ottoman period. From time to time, despite the tension between official and folk Islam, the Islamic nature of the political regime was crucial in providing legitimacy of the centre in the eyes of periphery. At that time Islam provided a common understanding, approach and a cultural bridge between the Ottoman elite and the society at large. When it comes to the Republican area, there existed a new configuration of social actors and the modernist-secular centre became increasingly resentful of religiosity and Islam, and excluded Islamic elements from social life gradually and later on completely, if possible.
1990s: Islamists as the ‘Centre’ of the Periphery
Mainly with the help of economic liberalization process in Turkey after 1980s, there has been a huge transformation in the periphery *per se* in terms of acting, thinking and looking at the issue. As the periphery gained more economic independence and freedom, it has proved itself by consequently electing *rigid* and seemingly contradictory political parties to power especially after the death of Ozal in the 1990s. From economic organizations such as Independent Industrial and Businessmen Association (MUSIAD) to youth organizations and to non-governmental organizations, the periphery has started to organize itself more powerfully and asked to be listened to. Started slowly in 1980s, after the 1990s the process started to bear fruit from intellectual, political and economic sphere and by merging with the already continuing of the same process, the result has become doubled. With the help and experience of the 80s generation, the process seemed to be accelerated. Indeed, the process was still slow, but the number of people who went through this process was increasing. This created instinctive reactions and fears among the elite of a centre that found its way in the expression of anxiety of losing hegemonic position.

Against this background, the centre initiated counter projects to stop the ‘marching of periphery’ to the centre. The so-called 28 February 1997 process, which ousted Welfare Party from power in a bloodless coup, and its aftermath have shown such move clearly. The barring of girls wearing headscarf to enter university, and naturally shutting down of Imam Hatip High Schools by limiting the fields at university entry exam through which its graduates can pursue their further studies, together with the closing the doors of Welfare and its successor Fazilet (Felicity) Party, all was intended to serve one purpose: to prevent or slow down the process of periphery walking to the centre rather than preventing Islamists taking over the country. During such a politically chaotic environment, the election of Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) to the Parliament in the 1999 election as the second biggest party was not a surprise at all. Turkish society was searching the ways to channel its voice, anger and exclusion from politics, and the lotto, so to speak, went to MHP. Until
the major economic crisis in 2000 and 2001, people in Turkey were still optimistic about their future. However, after the economic crisis, which drained such hopes down, the situation led people to look at new ways and faces in politics in the 2002 general elections.

**Turkey’s AK Party in Domestic and Regional Context**

The result of the November 2002 election in Turkey should be seen as a turning point in Turkish political order. If the rise of Islamist Refah Party in 1990s is seen as one of the most interesting characteristics of Turkish political system, an equally important noteworthy development is the existence of the AK Party. The election of AK Party as a representative of isolated and excluded periphery with an absolute majority to the Parliament in 2002 and subsequent elections and its fast-track acceleration of the Turkey’s EU process, whether it be influenced by external or domestic imperatives or both, have created possibility of a mild but radical exit from long-existing centre-periphery conflict in Turkey. In other words, AK Party has undertaken unwittingly the mission to complete or maturate Turkey’s modernization process with the extension of democracy. The realization of the ending of centre-periphery cul-de-sac by a conservative party, the AK Party, not by the traditional westernizers like Republican Party (CHP), might finally lead the normalization of Turkey’s long-wanted modernization/Westernization adventure possible.

It is commonly argued that the success or failure of the AK Party experience in Turkey is likely to have repercussions beyond Turkey’s border and in the entire Islamic world. In the literature, while analysis like ‘secular Turkey stands out as the bright and shining model for democratic development across the Islamic world’ widely exists, it is not clear what kind of modelhood Turkey can offer to the Middle East or to the Islamic world. Similarly, as democratization is becoming a reality in Turkey with its overwhelmingly Muslim population, the answer to the question of what does this development have to do with the Islamic world in practical application is not clear. Then, the development of ‘Muslim democracy’ and its applicability to other places is becoming not
more than an ‘empty box’ discussion, if this notion is not evaluated and understood within the social dimensions/structure of the Middle Eastern states.

Today in all non-democratic countries in general and in the Middle East in particular, there exists an alienated and excluded periphery that has almost no voice or influence in the decision making process; although the revolutions in the Arab world since 2011 is likely to change this in the longer term. Such groups usually resort to violence as the only way to express themselves, and come to surface sometimes as Islamist, sometimes as Leftists (or socialist) or another ideological form depending on the “opposition” ideologies of the time. If Turkey today with the AK Party’s coming to power has consolidated or partly settled down its centre-periphery relations without civil war or one side using violence, there lies Turkey’s modelhood to the Middle East and even possibly to the third world. Most of the problems in the Middle East have emanated from domestic sources rather than external ones. Naturally, the starting point to bring democracy, peace and prosperity should be there. A domestically-consolidated Turkey has much to offer to the Middle East where the centre-periphery clash is high. With the AK Party, the existing newer Turkey can be a much better model for the region and beyond.30

One important lesson to be learned from Turkey’s experience for the Middle East is that while Turkey is consolidating it center-periphery relations, there exist relatively independent state institutions that allowed periphery to persist in the system, be it elections or competition with other. In Turkey there was an absolute control of centre on the state institutions until 1950s that automatically excluded periphery. After 1950s, day-by-day the control of Turkey’s state institutions has been moved from the hand of centre (albeit still under the supervision of centre) to the middle between centre and periphery. The institutional character of Turkey made it relatively easy to keep Islamists from resorting to violence, and it has kept a way of ‘hope’ that one day they can rule the country. In the current Middle East, neither such an institutional structure that allows the periphery to have a ‘voice’, is to be found, nor is there any other way that the periphery can make itself be heard except resorting to violence.
State institutions are under absolute control of autocratic regimes, which is similar to the pre-1950 condition of Turkey. As experience from Turkish case, first an ‘opening up’ of institutions strategy should be implemented, then gradually pushing toward a more accommodative centre-periphery relation. Therefore, as Brumberg\textsuperscript{31} rightly argued, “for democracy to have any hope in the Arab world, it is not Islam to be fixed, but politics itself”.

**Conclusion**

Political issues and developments in the Third World have usually been looked at through the prism of theories and perspectives that might be seemingly fit to explain the issues. This article does not offer a new perspective for understanding the politics in the Third World, however, departing from the Turkish case, it argued that the analysis of Turkey from a secularist-Islamist clash perspective hinders the Turkish reality that exists for a long time now.

Analyzing Turkey through the prism of a clash between Secularists and Islamists has actually prevented outsiders (and even insiders) to see the issues from a broader perspective. Therefore, the Turkish case should be approached from a centre-periphery perspective, which I believe will help us to understand it much better. Looking from this angle, the AK Party experience in Turkey after 2002 needs special attention from several perspectives. First, its existence was the natural result of the newly developing and rapidly globalizing periphery in Turkey.\textsuperscript{32} The AK Party has been supported by the periphery with an overwhelming support and intended to be the voice of periphery. In Turkish domestic politics, it has been the first party that has increased its votes in the election after first period in the office.

The importance and success of the AK Party has implications beyond Turkey. In almost every third world country and the Islamic ones in particular, there exists a centre who dominates the power and a periphery that is actually deprived of power and decision-making. For example in the Middle East, there is a distinctive division between the ruling elite and the public. What is striking is that due to lack
of democracy and mostly the power transfer being held between family members, the excluded majorities have no way to channel their voices to be heard. AK Party is the only experience in the Middle East that brought the periphery to the centre without alienating or and clashing directly with the centre. This itself represents a major breakthrough given the existing literature’s emphasis that Islam and democracy are incompatible. The AK Party example shows that both can co-exist peacefully with an increasing legitimacy from the public. In that sense, AK Party can be seen as a model in a way that it has consolidated Turkey’s historical domestic divide between the centre and periphery. Considering that each society has different historical, institutional and structural setting in its political arena, the AK Party experience in Turkey can be an inspiring model in the Third World in general and the Middle East in particular. As the leaders behind AK Party experience made it explicit as early as in 2003 and later years frequently, Turkey does not want to be a model to any country, but drawing lessons and being ‘a source of inspiration’ in ‘find[ing] their own solutions to their own problems’ are as normal as historical events.33

Similarly the AK Party and Turkish experiences in Islamic politics represent the transformation from the fifth period to the sixth period in the modern Muslim politics. The fifth period has been relatively calm and successful. In the sixth period, there is likely to be more turbulence in Muslim countries, especially those in the Middle East as the Arab Spring has scattered the whole structure of politics and social dynamics. However, the success and failure of the key countries such as Turkey, Iran and Egypt will continue to shape Islamic politics in the years to come.

Notes
2. For example on Turkey’s policy toward the Arab Spring, see Mehmet Ozkan and Hasan Korkut, “Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Arab Revolutions”, Epiphany: Journal of Transdisciplinary Studies 6(1), 2013: 162-181.


9. For an excellent comparative perspectives on Turkey, Iran and Egypt in the 20th century, see Alev Erkilet Başer, Ortadoğu’da Modernleşme ve İslami Hareketler [Modernization in the Middle East and the Islamic Movements], (İstanbul: Yoneliş, 1999).


11. Mehmet Ozkan, Foreign Policy after Tahrir Revolution: (Re)-Defining the Role of Egypt in the Middle East. (Lap Lambert, 2011).

12. For the legacy of Mohammed Morsi in foreign policy, see Mehmet Ozkan, “Egypt’s Foreign Policy under Mohamed Morsi”, Ortadogu Analiz 5(51), 2013: 10-18.

13. This part is the expanded version of Mehmet Ozkan, “Turkey, Islamic Politics and the ‘Turkish Model’”, Strategic Analysis 37(5), 2013: 534-538.


18. For the ‘the popular mind’ concept see Jack Snyder, Myths of Empire: Domestic

Taspinar, *op.cit.*, 118.


Ahmet Insel’s similar argument after the AK Party victory can be extended after 1980 process in general, “The AKP and Normalizing Democracy in Turkey”, *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102 (Spring-Summer 2003): 299.


Ahmet Insel argues that AK Party has a possibility to take Turkey out of September 12 regime. However he makes similar point regarding the normalization of Turkey’s westernization process. See his “The AKP and Normalizing Democracy in Turkey”, *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102 (Spring-Summer 2003): 306.

For an example, see Ozbudun, *op.cit.*, 555; Galip Dalay and Dov Friedman, “The AK Party and the Evolution of Turkish Political Islam’s Foreign Policy”, *Insight Turkey* 15(2), 2013: 123-139.


Analyzing Turkey’s modellhood from a foreign policy perspective, Graham Fuller argues that the new Turkey with its independent foreign policy inclinations and sympathy to the Muslim world can be seen as a real model, “Turkey’s Strategic


33. For example see Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu’s interview, Al-Ahram Weekly (Cairo), http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/716/focus.html (10 Feb 2005); and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s interview, Newsweek, (May 12, 2008):68, and President Abdullah Gul, “Turkey’s Role in a Changing Middle East Environment”, Mediterranean Quarterly 15 (Winter 2004):2-7.