

## CHANGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: A TURKISH PERSPECTIVE

Popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and the intensifying protests in Libya, Yemen and Bahrain have brought the issue of change in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to the fore. While the foreign and security policies of the USA and the EU are being watched closely and calls are being made to review them, the co-existence of Islam with democracy in the Turkish example becomes highly relevant for the future. Whether Turkey can become a role model for these countries – themselves on the way to regime change – is being debated in the international media, including in Turkey.

Turkey not only brings together political Islam and democracy, but also secularism in its social-cultural and political identity and structure. This may be mostly a result of its location at the crossroads between the East and the West, but the choices that were made by the founders of the Republic in terms of setting Westernisation as a goal no doubt influenced the characteristics of this interesting blend. In addition, Turkish membership in international organisations such as the Council of Europe, NATO and the process of membership to the EU has consolidated the Turkish experience. Assessment of these factors has led to the emergence of two different lines of arguments on the role of Turkey as a model.

One group of experts (journalists and/or scholars) argues that the Turkish example cannot be applied to MENA, as the social and political structures display huge differences. To start with, the Turkish system is characterised by strict secularism enshrined in the Constitution and this is strongly upheld by political parties and most importantly by the military, which has intervened in politics either directly by coups or indirectly through the National Security Council and the statements warning the governments against threats to the regime. While secularism has been upheld in practice in Tunisia and Egypt so far by the



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dictatorial regimes, experts point out that these states accept Islam as the religion and people are far more religious than the Turkish people. This means that the strong and institutionalised support for secularism, which has led to change in Islamic movements in Turkey is missing. As a result, these experts argue that Turkey cannot be a role model for these countries.

However, since the military has been entrusted with the responsibility of the transition process in Egypt, even this aspect of Turkish experience becomes relevant as an example for the future of MENA. The first of a series of military interventions in Turkey started with a military coup in 1960 with the support of the people and it continues to be viewed positively in some people's imagination even today. The constitution that was accepted after the coup was quite democratic in the sense that it granted many freedoms, but it was the same constitution that laid down the means of military tutelage by, for instance, establishing the National Security Council. When decades later – in order to comply with EU standards – the number of civilians in the Council outnumbered military representatives and the Council's role changed from recommending measures to conveying views upon request for the government to assess, this

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was considered a huge breakthrough. Although the military coups in Turkey ended with a swift return to politics, we should consider that Turkey suffers from the vestiges of military tutelage even to this day. Moreover, the Egyptian military's strong entrenchment in the country's economic system and its role in supporting the previous regimes raises questions about its enthusiasm toward a fully-fledged democracy in line with the demands of the people. Hence we should be cautious about the stance and the role of the military.

If militaries endorse themselves as custodians of the new regimes, tensions will be inevitable in the national systems and this will influence international stability as well. The current role of the military and the idea of entrusting the military with the role of regime protection may seem feasible to various actors in the USA – and in particular in Israel – but a military regime or a regime under military tutelage will be susceptible to a constant securitisation of the disagreements with their neighbours as a way to evade domestic problems.

To take another example from the Turkish experience, rapprochement between Greece and Turkey was initiated by the civilians; this took place after the end of the Cold War when other security worries and domestic stability were not of paramount concern and both parties had eventual EU accession in mind. So a new security paradigm is necessary for the countries set to undergo change as well as for other actors in the region. It should be apparent to all actors that democracy and meeting the demands of the people for their freedoms is a step in the right direction for the emergence of a new security paradigm, which will prevent the escalation of tension and resort to the use or show of force in the region.

Another group of experts, argue that the value of the Turkish example lies in the experience of the Justice and Development Party (JDP), which has been in government for eight years. Despite the fact that the JDP has defined itself as a conservative democratic party, associations of its members with Islamic movements leads to a characterisation of the party as a representative of political Islam. The party was established in 2001 by a group of younger members of the Virtue Party, when the party was closed down by the Constitutional Court. The Virtue Party was itself an offspring of the previously-closed down Welfare Party, which goes to show that political Islam's existence in Turkey has not been free of

problems; the movement and its representatives had to evolve in order to survive. Namely, they had to come to terms with secularism. Coupled with the fact that political parties in opposition (such as the Republican Peoples Party and Nationalist Action Party now in parliament) have failed to offer any credible alternatives to the voters, avoiding criticisms of secularism led to the JDP becoming a dominant actor in the political system. These experts argued that since Turkey's popularity has risen in the eyes of the Middle East after JDP came to power, it is particularly the past eight years that should constitute an example for the countries that are undergoing or about to undergo change.

These comments have a point as not only the Islamist leader Rachid Ghannouchi from the Ennahda (Awakening) movement - who returned Tunisia after more than 20 years in exile - compared his movement to the JDP while rejecting comparisons with the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini, but the younger generations of the Muslim Brotherhood make references to the JDP as well. In addition, Turkish foreign policy under the JDP is welcomed in the region. The opinion of the Arab public – and even that of the elite – seems to have been influenced by the way the Turkish parliamentary system has worked ever since the negative vote on the US request to de facto open a second front against Iraq on the Turkish territory (2003). People seem to increasingly appreciate the JDP's foreign policy: it stood up against Israeli attacks in Gaza and spoke out about the recent killing of nine Turkish citizens who were part of an international aid convoy to Gaza. Surveys of the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) illustrate that the Turkish image is being viewed with increased positivity in the region. A July 2009 TESEV survey conducted in Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Syria found that 75% of respondents had very favourable and favourable views of Turkey, whereas the figure rose to 80% in the recent survey results announced before Prime Minister Erdoğan delivered a speech on the protests in Egypt recommending then-President Hosni Mubarak take action in line with the public's demands. Interestingly, the figure of the very favourable and favourable views on Turkey was 85% when Iranian respondents were included. As also pointed out in the panel which discussed the survey results, had it been conducted after Erdoğan's speech – which was broadcast in Tahrir square by Al-Jazeera – favourable views about Turkey would have been even higher than this figure.

Initially, however, the Turkish government was criticised for its vague and thin statements alongside Prime Minister Erdoğan for his silence on the protests in Tunisia and Egypt. After Erdoğan's first speech on 1 February and his following statements reminding Mubarak about the futility of clinging to power in the face of the people's legitimate demands for change and telling Egyptian protesters that asking for freedoms without resorting to violence is their democratic right, another line of criticism emerged. Critics stated that this is a difficult position to hold on to since the government had good relations with all other non-democratic regimes and that the speech violated the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries. PM Erdoğan responded by stating that Turkey wants democracy and universal law and freedoms as much as it wants peace and stability in its region. While PM Erdoğan's attitude was also criticised in particular by the Republican People's Party for interfering in the domestic affairs of another country, RPP Leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu later stated that support should be given to freedom and democracy in the region. He added that initiatives that bring together and encourage dialogue between intellectuals and representatives of various sectors, such as engineers, political scientists and sociologists, etc. should be carried out. Clearly, nobody can criticise supporting the establishment of democracies in the region. Therefore, the remaining question appears to be the type of democracies that are going to be established.

Recommendations on the basis of the Turkish experience:

- 1) It is essential for the West to take this historic opportunity and be on the side of the people in establishing true democracy in the region. As can be seen in the Turkish case, a regime that is under the control of the military will not be sustainable and it will always be susceptible to escalating tension in the region and harming regional and even international security and stability.
- 2) This will also bode well for the tarnished Western credibility in the region which is in need of repair. The EU should be ready to offer different kinds of aid and support ranging from sufficient economic aid by convening a donor's conference, to consolidating democracy in the region through the launching of civilian crisis management missions if necessary.
- 3) A review and revitalisation of existing mechanisms established by the EU such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Neighbourhood Policy are necessary especially to reward respect for human rights and rule of law

in the short run. Innovative mechanisms could be launched in cooperation with Turkey such as the "train the trainers programmes" or joint "civilian crisis management missions" for establishing rule of law and socialising the police, the prosecutors and the judges into universal values and norms and avoiding corruption.

- 4) The most important thing that the West can do is to encourage a new security paradigm for the region, which can only take hold if the Arab-Israeli conflict or at least the possibility of loss of lives ends. The plight of the Palestinians is no doubt important for the people of the region and existing situation leads to support for extremism or use of hard power in both parties. There can be no hope for sustainable democracy, peace or security in the region as long as the Palestinian issue is not addressed. To start with, the EU and Turkey can work together to find an acceptable solution on the basis of conditions to the problem of recognition of Hamas and the divided 'governance' in Palestine. Everybody should keep in mind the dictum that democracies do not go to war with one another. This may be the case even when people are Muslims, provided that this conflict in the region is resolved.