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978-0-521-88878-3 - Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey

M. Hakan Yavuz

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Introduction: what is an Islamic party? Is the AKP an Islamic party?

In November 2002 and July 2007 the Turkish electorate voted decisively for the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AK Parti) – hereafter referred to by its Turkish acronym of AKP, demonstrating that it was willing to take a risk for broad political change.¹ The voters swept away a generation of established politicians to give Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s AKP enough seats in Parliament to form a government on its own.² The election posed a dramatic challenge, that of whether a modern democratic party with deep roots in political Islam was capable of expanding civil liberties and maintaining the democratic system. Before the November 2002 election, many in the Western media had described the AKP as a “fundamentalist party.” After the election, the same journalists used the phrase “Islamist or Islamic party”; and when the party started to adopt the EU’s Copenhagen criteria, they referred to it as a “party with Islamic roots.”³ Two years later, when parliament had passed several major reform packages, the AKP was characterized as a “reformed Islamist party.”⁴ Later, during parliamentary consideration of new legislation on adultery, the European media once again used the adjective “Islamist” or “Islamic” to describe the AKP.

¹ The “*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*” is usually translated into English as the “Justice and Development Party” and is sometimes abbreviated to “AKP.” The Party has declared that the official shorthand for its name is “*AK Parti*,” so in English it is also referred to as the “AK Party.” However, the use of this term is controversial since “ak” in Turkish means light, pure, white, clean and uncontaminated. The AK Party has the connotation of the “party of light” and its party symbol is a light bulb. Scholars who have a critical distance from the party do not use “AK Parti” or “Ak Party” but its Turkish or English abbreviation AKP, since “Ak Party” carries with it too much of a positive connotation. Therefore, the “neutral” and uncontroversial shorthand for the party is “AKP” in both Turkish and English.

² Emmanuel Sivan, “The Clash within Islam,” *Survival* 45:1 (Spring 2003), 30. Sivan treats the electoral victory of the AKP as the rise and consolidation of Islamism in Turkey. His sweeping generalizations reflect a rather limited understanding of Turkish politics and this leads him to a number of ideologically tinged conclusions.

³ Graham Fuller’s writings were critical in the depiction of the AKP as an Islamic party. “Freedom and Security: Necessary Conditions for Moderation,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 22:3 (Summer 2005), 23–24.

⁴ *The Economist*, November 27, 2004.

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After the 2007 elections, *The Economist* called the AKP a “mildly Islamist” party.⁵ Jenny White of Boston University depicts the party as “the formerly Islamist AKP” and as a successful “manifestation of Islam.” Since the party was established in 2001, one wonders what she means by “formerly Islamist” or by presenting the AKP as a “manifestation of Islam.” Does she reduce Islam to the AKP?⁶

What is an Islamic party? How does one differentiate an Islamic party from a secular one? When and under what conditions does a formerly Islamic movement cease to be Islamic?⁷ This book will examine these three questions in the Turkish context. How should one classify the AKP? Is it Islamic, conservative or secular? Given its Islamic origins, the AKP firmly describes itself as a “conservative democratic” party and denies having an Islamic agenda. Islamists and some secularists argue that this is just a smokescreen, and that the AKP has no option but to present itself as “conservative” since it cannot legally refer to itself as Islamic. Indeed, the ban on the use of religion in politics has led to a politics of camouflage. Pro-Islamic or pro-ethnic parties are obliged to develop an areligious or non-ethnic language in the political sphere. People are often compelled to have recourse to a highly coded political language. Some scholars, such as Yasin Aktay, argue that “conservative democracy” is the only legally possible identity available to the AKP in the Turkish political landscape since it is illegal to form a party on the basis of religious ideas.⁸

Although the AKP leadership entered politics through Erbakan’s pro-Islamic National Outlook Movement, its leaders have constantly denied any connection with Erbakan’s Islamic agenda. The party leadership represents the modern and dynamic face of a new cosmopolitan Muslim identity; it regards Islamic networks as instruments of political mobilization. Yalçın Akdoğan, the ideologist of the AKP, denies party links with political Islam and even rejects the label “Muslim Democratic” party.⁹ The AKP marks the external boundary of political Islam after the February 28, 1997 process in Turkey.

⁵ *The Economist*, August 2, 2007.

⁶ Jenny White, “The End of Islamism?” in Robert W. Hefner (ed.), *Remaking Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 87–111.

⁷ Stathis N. Kalyvas, “Religious Mobilization and Unsecular Politics,” in T. Keselman and J. Buttigieg (eds.), *European Christian Democracy: Historical Legacies and Comparative Perspectives* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

⁸ Yasin Aktay, “Siyasette İslamiliğin Sınırları ve İmkanları,” *Tezkire*, 33 (July–August 2003), 31–41.

⁹ See interview with Akdoğan, *Sabah*, August 16, 2003. He argues that the AKP is not conducting the politics of ethnic or sectarian identity. It is not an identity-based party but it has its own inclusive identity. Yalçın Akdoğan, *AK Parti ve Muhafazakar Demokrasi* (Istanbul: Alfa, 2004).

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Islamic ideas and an Islamic worldview are still included in the identity of its leadership and might also be included in the AKP's deep-seated philosophy, but the AKP never uses the explicit language of political Islam, and indeed often feels compelled to stress that it is not an Islamic party. In other words, the AKP evolved in reaction to the authoritarian, and somewhat messianic, leadership of Necmettin Erbakan: against his anti-systemic and confrontational National Outlook philosophy, which relied on religious networks and Islamic identity to differentiate itself from other political parties in Turkey. Erbakan's strategy was "we are not one of those who represent the system" while Erdoğan seeks to convince people that "we are one of the mainstream parties such as the DP of Menderes or the AP of Demirel."

The AKP's repressed identity occasionally re-emerges. Inevitably, the identity of the AKP is shaped both by what it wants to *forget* (Islamism) and what it wants to *become* publicly (conservative democracy); it reflects a conflict between Islamism and the new rubric "conservative democracy," the term party leaders use to demonstrate that they are not an Islamic party. The party has particularly exploited, but is also constrained by, the EU membership project to demonstrate that it is not Islamic in either domestic or foreign policy. Conforming to the Copenhagen criteria is an aspect of this identity-building. In other words, the EU accession process has played a significant role in transforming the identity of the diverse socio-political groups in Turkey, including the AKP. The pro-EU groups are closely linked with the democratization process of Turkey. After the 1999 Helsinki decision to recognize Turkey as a "candidate" to join the EU, the support for the EU-based reforms became broader and deeper. The Copenhagen process provides the compass for the transformation of the Turkish economy and for democratic reforms as well as for change in foreign policy. In the last five years, more political-legal reforms have been passed in Turkey than over the last three decades. After 1999, the death penalty was abolished, freedom of expression was expanded, and Kurdish language and cultural rights were granted. The reforms also curtailed military power and enhanced civilian control of the security forces.

The AKP embarked on the EU reforms as its main political platform for a number of reasons. The Turkish military is for the most part, if not openly, against the structural reforms, while the AKP views entry into the EU as a road to political survival and a way of curtailing the military's power. In short, the AKP seeks to end the dual-track government that effectively limits democratic practices. However, the AKP still functions under the shadow of fear of the military and the state bureaucracy, and the suspicion that they might overthrow the AKP government and revoke the new set of reforms.

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For critics of the AKP, there is still a great deal of mistrust about the intentions of the party. Over a decade ago Erdoğan, while serving as the mayor of Istanbul, said “Thank God, I am for Sharia”¹⁰; “one cannot be a secularist and a Muslim at the same time”; and “for us, democracy is a means to an end.”¹¹ There is no fixed “litmus test” to establish the AKP’s commitment to a liberal view of secularism and democracy.¹² In this sense, the constraints and inducements presented by the EU and the secular regime have played a crucial role in getting the party leadership to re-examine and redefine its core beliefs and agenda.

According to the party programme, the AKP:

considers religion one of the most important institutions of humanity, and secularism as a prerequisite of democracy and an assurance of the freedom of religion and conscience. It also rejects the interpretation and distortion of secularism as enmity against religion. ... Our party refuses to exploit sacred religious values and ethnicity and to use them for political purposes.¹³

To what extent is the AKP different from the previous Refah and Fazilet parties, from which it has evolved? The party initially united a broad spectrum of Islamic activists, Turkish and Kurdish nationalists, and liberal reformers. The key leaders of the party have clearly given up their radical interpretations of political Islam, due to pressures from the military and from the main business and industrial association, TÜSIAD. The AKP is seeking to build its identity in government under Erdoğan’s strong leadership, but the party’s heterogeneous grassroots, with its different expectations, have complicated the process, which will necessarily be gradual, full of contradictions and inevitably entail intra-party conflict.

The AKP leadership consists of a core group of pious politicians who came to politics via Islamic networks and parties. Given the party’s Islamic roots and its leadership’s past activities and statements, one needs to explain how and why the party adopted its more liberal line. The transformation of this Turkish Muslim political movement, as it moved out of opposition and into political power, is an outcome of the change in civil society, especially the emergence of a new business class and new intellectuals. Although the Copenhagen criteria are important, it is a gross mistake to reduce the causes of this political transformation solely to the AKP’s acceptance of EU norms.

¹⁰ *Milliyet*, November 19, 1994.

¹¹ N. Bowcott, “Islamic Party Wins in Turkey,” *Guardian*, November 7, 2002.

¹² I use Casanova’s understanding of secularism as composed by three main dimensions: religious differentiation, privatization and decline. See Jose Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹³ *Development and Democratization Program 2:1*. www.akparti.org.tr/programeng3.asp

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The transformation of an Islamic movement–party

What is an Islamic party? Under what *conditions* does the *transformation* of an Islamic movement–party take place? What conditions and what types of religious movements facilitate and consolidate democratization? The case of Turkey is important in answering these questions. How will the example of the AKP as a governing democratic party with an Islamic reformist background impact the rest of the Islamic world? At present most commentators are mesmerized by Turkey’s impressive recent rate of democratization and economic development, and they tend to calculate its effect on the Muslim world by simply extrapolating it into the future. However, there are a number of problems with this simple reading of the Turkish experiment.

Before I examine these questions, it is important to provide the contextual meaning of “Islamic” in the case of Turkey. What does “Islamic” mean in the context of Turkey? Could it be possible to be Islamic in/by conduct and way of life, such as having a wife with a headscarf, or not drinking alcohol and sharing an Islam-based morality, without necessarily subscribing to an ideology to establish an Islamic state? In the context of Turkey, “Islamic” means someone who seeks a prominent role for Islamic ethics and practices in the organization of everyday life. The AKP deliberately avoids pursuing a policy of Islamic identity politics. Yet its politics are very much derived from Islamic life-styles. This is politics of life-style, or identity of a party derived from the identity of its key cadres and their pious acts in public. This life-style politics is also enhanced by the body-language of the person of Erdoğan. The party leadership participates in religious activities, with its headscarf-covered wives and daughters, and performs religiously sanctioned gender roles which differentiate them from other parties and also facilitate the covert ideology of the party. In short, the AKP leadership wants to liberate private and everyday life from the intervention of the “modernizing” state, whereas the Republican People’s Party wants to keep religion out of public and private life at the same time.

With the greater expansion of economic opportunity spaces in Turkey and the formation of an assertive Muslim bourgeoisie, the process of moderation has intensified the commitment to political liberalization within Islamic movements.¹⁴ Not all but, rather, moderate Islamic

¹⁴ Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, translated by Carol Volk (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994) and *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); L. Carl Brown, *Religion and State: The Muslim Approach to Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); James Piscatori and Dale Eickelman, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

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movements are likely to facilitate democracy if they perceive it as the optimal solution to existing socio-political problems. Commitment to democracy is very important for a movement to facilitate the democratization process.

Religious identities, institutions and networks are important in the constitution of social capital and movement formation. Religious identities and ideologies help to protect marginalized groups from the dominant classes and provide a conceptual tool to challenge an oppressive government in the name of justice.¹⁵ Moreover, in this context, religious movements can represent excluded groups and work for a more inclusive boundary between state and society via democratization. Studies on Christian Democratic parties in Europe and Latin America indicate that the secularization of the party's discourse stresses basic freedoms for the religious electorate. In order to appeal to the broadest possible electorate, confessional parties distanced their discourse and party organization from religious institutions and became more pragmatic. The result has been the evolution of a secular Catholic political identity. In addition to this electoral pressure for moderation, the parameters of the regime also play an important role in the transformation of religious parties.

1996); John Esposito and François Burgat (eds.), *Modernizing Islam: Religion in the Public Sphere in Europe and the Middle East* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Joel Beinin and Joe Stork (eds.), *Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997); Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Charles Kurzman, "Bin Laden and Other Thoroughly Modern Muslims," *Contexts*, 1 (Fall/Winter 2002), 13–20.

¹⁵ With respect to the proto-modern character of both Puritanism and Islamism Goldberg argues that:

Calvinism and the contemporary Islamist Sunni movements in Egypt are discourses on the nature of authority in society. Historically both movements arose as central state authorities made absolutist claims to political power and, in the process, sought to dominate transformed agrarian societies in new ways. Ideologically, both movements asserted that the claims of sweeping power by nominally religious secular central authorities were blasphemous egotism when contrasted with the claims of God on the consciences of believers. Socially, both movements transferred religious authority away from the officially sanctioned individuals who interpret texts to ordinary citizens. Institutionally, both movements create communities of voluntary, highly motivated and self-policing believers that yield greater degrees of internal cohesion and compliance than the absolutist authority can achieve, and they therefore can become the basis of postabsolutist political authority in an authoritarian and antidemocratic fashion. (195)

Ellis Goldberg, "Smashing Idols and the State: The Protestant Ethic and Egyptian Sunni Radicalism," in Juan R. I. Cole (ed.), *Comparing Muslim Societies: Knowledge and the State in a World Civilization* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 195.

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What is an Islamic party?

Definitional problems inevitably arise in any discussion of religious parties. For instance, is the AKP an Islamic party? How does one define a religious party? How should one differentiate religious parties/politics and secular parties/politics? I define a religious party as one whose ideology is derived from or shaped by religious ideas and which mobilizes the grassroots on the basis of shared religious identity. Such parties seek *regime change* by implementing their religious worldviews; in the case of the Muslim world, the Islamization of the state and society is their main goal. Religious parties seek to overcome class and ethnic divisions on the basis of a shared religious affiliation.¹⁶

Religious parties not only focus on religious norms and issues but their platforms incorporate secular as well as religious appeals, issues and themes. This makes the task of disentangling the reasons why voters support these parties difficult.¹⁷ Do voters choose these parties because they seek to bring religion back into the public sphere, or do they vote for them because these parties are seen as less corrupt and more committed to social justice, or because they provide a political opportunity to marginalized sectors of the population to take part in the political process? Religious parties may gradually moderate and secularize their agenda in response to electoral and non-electoral factors. Thus, the study of religious parties must focus on their ability to meld religious and secular agendas, on their electoral success or failure and especially on their protean nature, evolution and oscillation between religious and secular concerns and compromises. A closer study of Christian Democratic parties indicates that the evolution of these parties is the result of domestic and international transformations. The European Christian Democratic parties were often influenced by the ideas of the French Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain. In *Integral Humanism*, he argued for an “integral democracy” that consisted of “pluralist,” “personalistic” and “communitarian” conceptions of politics.¹⁸ His major contribution was to develop an argument that theism provides a better basis for democracy than liberalism. He defended personalism over egotistic individualism; moral communal responsibility over self-interest; sharing over the profit motive. Moreover, Maritain regarded democracy as the most important framework for bringing Christian values into the public domain and for

¹⁶ Scott Mainwaring and Timothy R. Scully (eds.), *Christian Democracy in Latin America: Electoral Competition and Regime Change* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Vali Nasr, “The Rise of ‘Muslim Democracy’,” *Journal of Democracy*, 16:2 (April 2005), 13–27.

¹⁸ Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism* (New York: Scribner’s, 1938).

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enhancing communities. He argued that democracy requires full religious freedoms for the socialization of faith into everyday life.¹⁹

It is important to differentiate religious (Islamic) parties from religious (Islamic) politics. A party might not be Islamic, such as the case of the Democrat Party under Adnan Menderes, the Justice Party under Süleyman Demirel and the Motherland Party under Turgut Özal, but could pursue “Islamic politics” by acting in conformity with the religious demands and concerns of the people. By Islamic politics I mean the competition and contest to define the meaning of life, identity and community via Islamic values. Islamic arguments are public statements or speech acts that are grounded in a religious tradition. On the basis of this definition, the AKP cannot be considered a religious party because it does not seek the *religious transformation of state and society*. Rather it seeks to maximize its seats in parliament to enhance its political power, but it does not seek to institute Islamic law in the political and social sphere or make political claims on the basis of religion. The AKP is, however, deeply involved in Islamic social ethics and cultural norms, and stresses the religious values and interests of its pious electorate. Just like the BJP in India, it has deep religious roots, but it has evolved to the point that one can no longer easily consider it as simply a religious party. The AKP’s political activism demonstrates a deep interest in religious rights in terms of defending the freedoms of those who care about issues such as the headscarf, the imam-hatip schools where students receive a religious as well as a secular education, and optional Qur’anic study courses for students of high school age. The AKP toned down its Islamic identity and agenda after it came to power due to pressure from the Kemalist military and bureaucracy. The party has to adhere to strict secular regime guidelines for exercising power in order to maintain its legal status. The secular character of the regime in Turkey has been protected by the military through military coups in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997. The Kemalist elite have always remained suspicious about the activities of religious groups and parties, seeing them as reacting against the modernizing and secularizing mission of Kemalism.

In addition to the constraints set by the secular regime, Turkey’s international engagements with NATO, the European Council and the EU force Islamic parties towards accommodation. In some cases, domestic legitimacy is guaranteed by international, especially US, support. In recent years, EU support has been essential for the democratic and

¹⁹ More on the ideas of Maritain, see Paul Sigmund, “Maritain on Politics,” in Deal Hudson and Matthew Mancini (eds.), *Understanding Maritain* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), pp. 153–170.

economic transformation of the country. Hence AKP leaders became pragmatic and used opportunities to demonstrate their commitment to the Europeanization project and consciously avoided issues that could be viewed as overtly Islamic. They used Islamic language during the elections in dealing with emotionally charged issues, but largely in order to convert Islamic sentiments into votes. While its roots are Islamic and outwardly religious, as a political party the AKP leadership has compromised on its religio-political convictions and objectives. However, has the AKP actually reconsidered its ideology or even abandoned the Islamic vision so central to the movement's leadership and followers? Or is it more accurate to say that the AKP has in fact transformed itself into a typical political party, accepting the secular framework of the state while it functions within the confines of the Turkish polity. If this is the case, then what developments led to such a dramatic shift in ideology and goals? While it would be premature to suggest that Islamic objectives have been forgotten, it appears at least that they have been temporarily set aside in favor of more pragmatic goals. For now, it seems that a stable and more powerful Turkish democracy will suffice, with the AKP as the dominant political party. In the transformation of the movement, opportunity spaces played the most critical role. Eventually, the shortcomings of the February 28 coup in 1997 offered a tantalizing opportunity behind which new ideas of civil society and a democratic polity were promoted by a new leadership.

This book sheds light on the nature of the incentives that tend to lead policy makers to change their worldview, and also examines the conditions which facilitate socio-political transformation. The post-February 28, 1997 process was a critical juncture when a major change took place in the EU accession process. In the transformation of Islamic parties, we have to examine the facilitating and inhibiting factors, along with the recognition of windows of opportunity.

When and how does an Islamic Party cease to be Islamic?

Recent literature on the growing moderation of Islamic movements/parties argues that the parties moderate themselves as a result of a number of factors.²⁰ I tend to differentiate those factors associated with the opposition

²⁰ For more on Islamic movements and democracy, see Vali Nasr, "The Rise of 'Muslim Democracy'," *Journal of Democracy*, 16:2 (2005), 13–27; Njorn Olav Utvik, "Hizb al-Wasat and the Potential for Change in Egyptian Islamism," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 14:3 (2005), 293–306. For Indonesia, Robert W. Hefner, *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization* (Princeton: Princeton University

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from those associated with the government.²¹ When Islamic parties are in opposition, they utilize strategic calculations to maximize electoral support. When there is a chance of coming to power or joining coalition governments, they moderate their position to win the centrist votes. In the emergence and evolution of the AKP, state oppression and the electoral strategies to receive more votes played crucial roles. In order to survive, the AKP expanded its electoral base, and to avoid state oppression, it internalized its adherence to democratic norms. When the party was voted into office in 2002, it even took unexpected steps to compromise with the Kemalist establishment to maintain its domestic and international legitimacy. In the case of Islamic parties in Turkey, one can argue that the conditions of moderation before and after the parties come to power are not the same. Before an Islamic party can come to power, state repression, electoral strategies of expanding its base and the ability of the system to reward the change by allowing it to govern are necessary conditions or factors for moderation to occur. State repression leads to splits within the Islamic movement due to new opportunities for more moderate groups. However, repression by itself is not a sufficient condition for an Islamic party to adopt moderation. A splinter group must be given the opportunity to participate and, if elected, to rule. When the party is in government, it must avoid confrontation and seek further moderation in order to maintain its domestic legitimacy.

Moreover, in parliament or in government, Islamic parties become more moderate as a result of learning and internalizing democratic values and norms. In order to end authoritarian state repression, Islamic parties begin to realize the virtue of democracy and pluralism. However, sections of the party, rather than the whole, are more prone to democratic conversion. Why are some party members more prone than others to democratic conversion? It appears that those members who were directly targeted by state repression, those who experienced more harassment, jailing or even torture when in the legal or underground opposition, are less likely to adopt the democratic conversion process when in power. Yet, there is a way of shaping one's conduct through setting examples as well.

There is a trade-off between the AKP's participation and remaining in the government and the moderation of its ideology and tactics. Political

Press, 2005). For Turkey, M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). For Morocco, Isabelle Werenfels, "Between Integration and Repression," *SWP Research Paper*, S 39 (December 2005).

²¹ Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Commitment Problems in Emerging Democracies: The Case of Religious Parties," *Comparative Politics*, 22 (July 2000), 379–397; John Waterbury, "Fortuitous By-Products," *Comparative Politics*, 29 (April 1997), 383–402; Nancy Bermeo, "Myths of Moderation: Confrontation and Conflict during Democratic Transitions," *Comparative Politics*, 29 (April 1997), 305–322.