

## REVIEW ESSAY

### Turkey's Islamists: Accidental Democrats

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**BANU ELIGÜR.** *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xviii + 317 pages, acknowledgments, tables, figures, bibliography, index. Paper US\$31.99 ISBN 978-1-1076-1772-8.

**NADER HASHEMI.** *Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 304 pages, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth £48.99 ISBN 978-0-19-532124-1.

**BERNA TURAM.** *Between Islam and the State: The Politics of Engagement.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006. x + 230 pages, acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, index. Paper US\$24.95 ISBN 978-0-8047-5501-6.

**M. HAKAN YAVUZ.** *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xvi + 301 pages, preface, map, abbreviations, bibliography, index. Paper US\$34.99 ISBN 978-0-5217-1732-8.

**W**hen it was founded in 2001, the current ruling party in Turkey, the Justice and Development Party (JDP), unequivocally declared its commitment to democracy and secularism (JDP 2014). Nevertheless, the party's implementation of reforms aimed at strengthening Turkey's democracy after coming to power in 2002 surprised many observers because the JDP's top leaders had been known Islamists. The speed and dedication with which the government introduced and implemented laws aimed at "European-style normalization" even impressed the EU, leading to the historic decision of 17 December 2004 to open negotiations with Turkey for full membership (Kirişçi 2004). Such commitment seemed to be a rarity and therefore did not escape the attention

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of scholars either. It led to the publication of several academic works, four of which are the subject of this review essay.

The JDP provides an interesting case study for a broader question that has acquired new significance in the post-9/11 world: whether Islamists, as the most potent oppositional force, can serve as democratic forces in the Middle East and the Islamic world. For this to happen, one body of study assumes that Islamists must be moderate in their ideology and behavior, which is possible only if they participate in electoral politics (see Tezcür 2010, for a review of this literature). Although this finding is insightful, it does not explain why Islamists become not only moderate but also democratic forces at a particular moment, not earlier or later (see Tepe 2012, for a similar critique). The next section discusses what the four books under review say on these matters.

### **Islamists as Democratizers**

Turkey has long been known for its staunchly secular military, which has jealously protected not only its own secular nature but also that of the state and its politics. The first question raised by the JDP phenomenon is, then, how did a party with an Islamist background assume such prominence in Turkey? This is the question Banu Eligür seeks to answer in her work, *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey*.

Eligür identifies two major stages in the rise of political Islam in Turkey. The first stage starts with the 1980 military coup, which made three major and rather unintentional contributions to the outcome. First, in order to counter leftist ideology, the military introduced a religious-nationalist ideology—the Turkish-Islam thesis—as the official state ideology and made religious classes mandatory in state schools. Second, the military also brutally suppressed the leftist and rightist groups that had dominated politics in the pre-1980 period, and hence cleared the way for political Islam. Third, the military improved its relations with Saudi Arabia to attract capital to Turkey, which encouraged the growth of a moneyed class sympathetic to political Islam. The transition back to multiparty elections in 1983 also contributed to the rise of political Islam in Turkey: The ruling party, the Motherland Party (MP), was sympathetic to the political Islamist cadres and even incorporated some of them into its ranks.

The second stage in the rise of political Islam, according to Eligür, starts with the end of MP rule in Turkey in 1991. It was during this stage that political Islam reaped the benefits of the strong organizational capacity it had developed in the previous stage. However, for this to happen, two additional factors had to be present. The first was a global wave of democratization, freedom, and human rights, which provided political

Islamists with a powerful vocabulary with which to defend themselves. The second was a malfunctioning state, “characterized by massive corruption, unequal distribution of wealth, unemployment, and a decay in moral values as well as in law and order” (27), which turned into propaganda material in the hands of political Islamists and helped them score critical victories in the municipal elections of 1994 and the parliamentary elections of 1995.

Eligür also discusses the impact of the 1997 military intervention on politics, which is known as the February 28 post-modern coup. This soft coup narrowed the political space for political Islam in Turkey and led to a split in the ranks of political Islamists. The JDP was born out of this split and was founded by the younger generation, who adopted a less antisystemic discourse and framed its objectives in line with Turkey’s lengthy quest for EU membership.

The rise of political Islam was, of course, not unique to Turkey, as it also rose to prominence elsewhere in the Muslim world. Yet Turkey was an unusual case in that political Islam played a leading role in the democratization of the political system in Turkey. What explains this rarity? Why did political Islam play such a role in Turkey? The other three books covered in this review seek an explanation.

In *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey*, Hakan Yavuz formulates the critical issue as follows: “The AKP [i.e., JDP] 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” (4). “Under what conditions,” asks Yavuz, “does the transformation of an Islamic movement-party take place? What conditions and what types of religious movements facilitate and consolidate democratization” (5).

Yavuz’s explanation is multistaged. In the first stage, the economic liberalization program that was implemented in the 1980s by Turgut Özal, the prime minister of Turkey from 1983 to 1989, expanded economic opportunities in Turkey and led to the formation of a Muslim bourgeoisie class. This new bourgeoisie class, in turn, made possible the more assertive participation of Muslim intellectuals in Turkey’s expanding public sphere and the increasing commitment of Islamic movements to political liberalization. In other words, when it came to power, the JDP found its societal base ideologically and behaviorally ready for a transformation.

Yet such a transformation could not be achieved under the leadership of the old generation of political Islamists such as Necmettin Erbakan. Hence, they had to be discarded. What is known in Turkey as the February 28

post-modern coup liquidated this old guard: The leader of the political Islamic movement in Turkey and long-time mentor of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Necmettin Erbakan, was banned from politics for five years, which provided an excellent opportunity for the new generation and “taught Erdoğan to realize the parameters of democracy and the power of the secularist establishment, and forced him to become a moderate and a democrat” (68).

In the final stage, Yavuz argues, the main parameters of the regime in Turkey continue to play a transformative role in the JDP. When the JDP came to power, it faced another challenge: surviving in politics as it had to work under the watchful eyes of the military. In such a context, the JDP leadership found in the EU accession process, and hence in democratization, a powerful antidote to the military-dominated political system.

In her work, *Between Islam and the State*, Berna Turam also views the JDP as “a globally recognized model of a ‘Muslim democracy’ in the new millennium” (20) and states that her goal is “to identify the specific historical and sociopolitical conditions and cultural venues that enabled Turkish Islamic actors to cooperate with pro-democratic forces in negotiating the terms of liberal democracy with the Turkish state” (34).

As a key to explaining this phenomenon, Turam points to “engagement” between the state and Islamist actors in Turkey. Despite the multiplicity of forms of engagement between the two, which may range from “contestation to negotiation to accommodation, cooperation and alliance” (13), Turam emphasizes that these engagements occurred in a particular national context defined by the secular character of the Turkish state. The Islamists and the state interacted “within the boundaries of the Republican protect” and developed a familiarity with each other. As a result, both the Islamists and the state developed “a feeling of belonging . . . to the nation and its state” (34–35).

This feeling of belonging, in turn, led both sides to soften their attitudes toward each other and create a friendlier environment. Turam emphasizes that it was not solely the Islamist actors but also the secular groups that changed their attitudes. As a result, the Islamist actors became less confrontational with the state as the latter accepted them as legitimate actors, which was critical to the outcome.

It must be noted that according to Turam, this was a learning experience for both sides, and hence, it took time to flourish. The trigger came in the 1980s when Turgul Özal, the prime minister, adopted a more tolerant attitude toward Islam. This led Islamist actors to become less confrontational. The February 28 post-modern coup, which was aimed at curtailing the growing political, economic, and social power of the Islamist actors, had a rather

limited impact on this form of engagement, and it proved to be transitional, except that it gave birth to an important nonconfrontational political party, the JDP. Realizing that Necmettin Erbakan's old confrontational engagement with the state had not paid off, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the leader of the JDP, adopted a more conciliatory tone and became less confrontational.

Turam also points to the critical contribution of the process of democratization to the outcome in Turkey. She notes that the republican project had been authoritarian in nature, especially in its insistence on the secular character of the state, and as such, had triggered a process of democratization. Not surprisingly, therefore, democratization in Turkey was really aimed at taming the authoritarian secular character of the state. Such democratization would be obviously beneficial to Islamists. The whole process also gave them a chance to experiment with secular ideology.

For Turam, Turkey presents an interesting case of Islamists having seemingly no qualms about the secular character of the state. Their problem, Turam claims, was with the state's authoritarian character. This is also the central factor in Nader Hashemi's *Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy*. Hashemi argues that Islamists in Turkey "have not only philosophically accepted the principle of the separation of religion and state but also reject the idea of the state enforcement [of] Shariah law and support Turkey's bid for entry into the European Union" (155). It is for this reason that they can promote democratization and liberalization in their own country.

Hashemi points to the protomodern character of contemporary Islamist movements, claiming in particular that they destroy the remnants of the traditional order and are bringing modernity to the Islamic world. Yet Hashemi is also aware of the possibility that the same process may not necessarily bring liberal democracy but could produce, as it happened in Europe, fascist-totalitarian systems. To avoid the latter outcome, Muslims must necessarily develop and embrace a secular understanding of Islam. Yet Hashemi warns that such a secular understanding cannot be introduced in a top-down fashion, as was attempted by the founders of the Republic of Turkey in the beginning and as was forcibly sustained by the military for the rest of the century. Rather, such an understanding must be homegrown or indigenous.

According to Hashemi, this is what happened in Turkey—Muslim intellectuals and political parties played a critical role in developing such an understanding of Islam and then spreading it among the masses. A deeper ideological transformation among religiously based parties and Muslim

intellectuals that was favorable toward secularism explains how religious groups in Turkey could make their contribution to the democratization process.

In sum, the four books shed critical light on the JDP's ascendancy to power. They do not necessarily conflict with each other's arguments but, instead, reinforce and complement each other. While Eligür and Yavuz provide a detailed picture of the structural conditions that paved the way for the rise of political Islamists, Turam provides a picture of their behavioral transformation and Hashemi that of their ideological transformation.

However, none of the four books, with the exception of Eligür's, predicts the subsequent turn of events in Turkey as the JDP, especially in its third term, became increasingly authoritarian. After I explain this authoritarian turn, I will turn to the limitations of the books reviewed.

### **The JDP's Authoritarian Turn**

Especially in its third term in power, which began in 2011, the JDP has become more authoritarian. It has not only lost its reformist zeal but has also sought to undo some important democratic gains. Several legislative moves by the JDP are illustrative. For example, a recently passed law expanded the powers of the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), granting it unprecedented immunities against the law. The new law, warns Taştekin (2014), risks turning the country into an intelligence state.<sup>1</sup> Another controversial bill, known as the Internet Law, gave the state authorities the right to block websites without a court order and leaves them blocked until a court's decision.<sup>2</sup>

In another instance, ultimately blocked by the Constitutional Court, the JDP attempted to grant unjustifiable powers to the minister of justice in the management of the Higher Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HCJP), which administers the court system in Turkey. As warned by the president of the European Association of Judges for Democracy and Freedom (MEDEL), Antonio Cluny, the bill infringed on the minimum standards for an independent judiciary (Anonymous 2014a). Furthermore, the leader of the party and Turkey's prime minister has become increasingly disrespectful of the rule of law, often threatening judges and state prosecutors. In one instance, for example, he expressed his dismay over the Constitutional Court's decision to lift the government ban on Twitter, describing the decision as "unnationalistic" and disrespectful of national moral values (Anonymous 2014b).

The media environment has also deteriorated in Turkey. Reflecting this deterioration, in May 2014 Freedom House downgraded Turkey from "Partly Free" to "Not Free" (Karlekar 2014). The government control and pressure

over the media began to seriously undermine the fairness of the elections in Turkey, with the ruling party receiving more media coverage than its opponents.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, there are reports that the JDP selectively uses the legal system to punish the media, non-governmental organizations, business associations, and even religious groups that are critical of the government,<sup>4</sup> and adopts extremely harsh and often disproportionate measures against otherwise peaceful protestors.<sup>5</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, to find some academics who claim that the political system in Turkey is no longer an electoral democracy but rather, in the formulation of Levitsky and Way (2010), a “competitive authoritarianism.”<sup>6</sup>

The question is, do any of the books reviewed here provide any insight into this turn to authoritarianism?

### **The Limits of Islamism?**

None of the books, except Hashemi’s, asks us to believe that the Islamists of Turkey have become genuine democrats. Rather, Turam, Yavuz, and Eligür seem to treat Turkey’s Islamists as accidental democrats and illustrate the contingent nature of that outcome.

Turam, Hashemi, and Yavuz seem to believe in the irreversibility of the process. In other words, there is a strong liberal bias or a sort of Fukuyaman belief in the irresistibility of democracy in their accounts.<sup>7</sup> Eligür, however, is different. For her, there is not even a slight possibility that Islamists can be democratic. Once the particular context that forces Islamists to act as democratizers is gone, she contends, they will turn their backs on democracy and secularism. Although her suspicions seem to have been proven correct by the turn of events in Turkey, Eligür does not explain why Islamists in Turkey cannot be “democrats” and why her arguments should not be seen as an essentialist account.

There are at least three issues that, had they been addressed, could have greatly improved the accounts presented in these four books. These three issues can become subjects of future research on the JDP’s authoritarian turn. The first issue is the changing nature of relations between the JDP and other religious groups and movements in Turkey. Usually, such groups have been extremely divided in their support for political parties (Yavuz 2003). Yet during the 2000s, this disunity seems to have resolved, since almost all Islamist intellectuals, Sufi orders, and other grass-root religious groups in Turkey have stood behind the JDP. More importantly, most, if not all, have remained loyal to and supportive of the JDP as it became more authoritarian. It seems that the JDP successfully managed to unite this otherwise diverse

community and thus guaranteed a committed bloc of votes in elections. None of the books takes a serious look at the nature of relations between the JDP and other religious actors in Turkey and thus fails to account for how the JDP could become authoritarian without endangering the support of this societal base.

The second issue concerns the JDP's relationship to the media. The JDP seems to have systematically worked, well before its third term, to create its own media—the party not only achieved full control over the public TV station but also sought ways to impose firmer control over private media. More systematic research on the exact mechanisms by which the JDP came to dominate the media is critical to shedding light on the JDP's consolidation of power and its recent inclination toward authoritarianism. Yet none of the books reviewed in this paper pays attention to the fragile and changing media ownership in Turkey. Therefore, their accounts fail to give a fuller picture of the transformation Turkey has undergone under the JDP.

The third and final issue concerns the books' treatment of Islamic groups as one block and the inability to capture the internal dynamics of Islamist discourses and ideologies in Turkey. As the JDP has become more authoritarian, it has adopted an increasingly religious and conservative discourse, which for many means simply backing out of its earlier commitment to democracy and secularism. Was the earlier declaration simply a dissimulation of real intentions or *taqiyya*, as Eligür seems to contend? Do Turam, Hashemi, and Yavuz too easily ignore the multiplicity of positions and contradictions within the Islamic discourse and dismiss this possibility?

The solution to this dilemma may lie in more hermeneutical analyses of the discourses and ideologies of the religious community in Turkey. It must be remembered that Islamists, especially in Turkey, indeed use terms such as democracy, human rights, and freedoms that did not originate in Islamic theology or jurisprudence. But, what meaning do they give to them? What they understand these terms to mean might be quite different from what the terms suggest elsewhere, for example, in advanced democracies. We can gain a deeper understanding of the nature and political implications of these discourses only through more systematic research on Islamist discourse and ideology in Turkey. ✦

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>See Human Rights Watch (2014) for the content of the law.

<sup>2</sup>For a critical discussion of the law, see Baydar (2014).



<sup>3</sup>For the disproportionate coverage of the ruling party on state television, see Armutçu (2014) and Kaya (2014).

<sup>4</sup>More systematic research needs to be done, but several notorious cases made headlines, such as the Doğan Group Case (Strauss 2009), the Koç Group Case (Cornell, 2013), and the Akin İpek Case (Anonymous, 2013). Two religious groups, the Gülen movement and Tunahan group, known in Turkey as Süleymanlılar, also report that they have been subjected to systematic governmental abuse.

<sup>5</sup>For the police's reaction against the Gezi Protests, see Amnesty International (2013).

<sup>6</sup>See Somer (2014) and Başkan (2014). Levitsky and Way (2010, 7) distinguishes competitive authoritarianism from democracy as follows: "incumbent abuse of the state violates at least one of three defining attributes of democracy: (1) free elections, (2) broad protection of civil liberties, and (3) a reasonably level playing field."

<sup>7</sup>Francis Fukuyama (1992) argued that mankind has reached the end of its ideological evolution with Western liberal democracy.

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