

The Great Transformation of Political Islam in Turkey: The Case of Justice and Development Party and Erdogan

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Abstract:

The relation between Islam and politics has been debated in many perspectives. Many people argue that Islam has natural political tendency and therefore, deserves to be called as political religion. The term Islamism has been designated in order to express Islam as political and ideological religion. Taliban, al-Qaida and Iranian regimes have been presented as the best typical cases for Islamism. In fact, Islamism is not a monolithic phenomenon, which includes diversity within itself. In this regard, the case of AKP in the Turkey is unique experience, which should be considered a new chapter in the history of Islamism. Although AKP has the support of religious people from society, it achieves to change its understanding of religion and politics. AKP presents itself not as a representative of Islam, but as conservative democrats, which means secular tones determines AKP's political framework, not religious ones. Today, AKP as a conservative democrat party, defends change, reform and transformation in favour of democracy, human rights and rule of law against Kemalist state elites. In this article, we try to present AKP as a special case of political Islam and argues that AKP is not an Islamist party, but it becomes a vehicle for change and transformation in Turkey.

Key words: Islamism, secularism, the West, EU, democracy, political Islam

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Political Islam: From Religion to Religionism

Politics has always been considered as the central dimension of Islam by many people. As a result of this widespread perception, Islam is easily labelled as *the political religion*. In contrast to this reductionist perception, Islam is a multidimensional phenomenon, which includes theology, philosophy, ethics, law and spirituality alongside with politics. It is possible to say that in one sense it is appropriate to label Islam as *the political religion*, but it is not appropriate to reduce Islam *merely* to *politics*. Identifying Islam with politics is the source of many misunderstandings and problems, because such identification makes Islam nothing, except politics. While Islamists are proud to emphasize close links between Islam and politics, they forget that the politization of religion makes Islam no longer *religion* but *political ideology*, which jeopardizes the religious essence of Islam.

Converting Islam to a political ideology is a modern phenomenon. The ideologization of religion is not a natural part of Islam. But it is an accidental phenomenon, which has been mostly produced by contemporary conditions. The ideologization of Islam has been called as *political Islam* or *Islamism*. It is important to highlight that although Islamists always speak in the name of Islam, their religionist ideology based on religious and irreligious factors. In other words, it is necessary to understand political Islam not only in religious terms but also no-religious terms as well.

Political Islam as the Secular Ideology

Political Islam as the child of modernity is a secular ideology. In other words, Islamism is an *unIslamic* ideology. Like any other modern secular ideologies, Islamism is intensely focussed on the no-religious issues, such as state, society and politics. Political Islam does not give a central value to human individual, it constructs society, state and politics in a totalitarian manner, then justifies its construction through Islam and finally creates a political and social activism. Islamist ideology rejects *status quo* and seeks to change politics and society. Religious traditionalism is not an essential part of the political Islam, because the supporters of Islamism go beyond the boundaries of religious tradition.

Although Islamists emphasize the primary importance of religion, they do not focus merely on religious problems. They use a secular language, address secular problems, give references to Western thought, principles and institutions. By using a no-religious language Islamists get opportunity to relate their ideological Islam to social, cultural, economical and political problems, such as poverty, corruption, democracy, human rights violations, religious freedom, social justice, imperialism, cultural backwardness, Palestinian question, and globalization. Interpretation of these problems in the light of the ideological religion makes political Islam meaningful, valuable and inevitable world-view for many people.

Political Islam as the Pluralistic Phenomenon

For most people al-Qaida or Iranian revolution are the typical models of the political Islam. Although they are the two forms of Islamism, political Islam is not limited to them. There is enormous plurality and variety in the area of the political Islam. Every Muslim country has its own version of the political Islam. Turkish version of the political Islam is not the same as Egyptian version. Although Islamist parties, organizations and movements could share some common characteristics, they also have their own distinctive qualities and identities. The movements of political Islam do not allow us to make certain generalisations, because of their particularities and distinctions.

A Special Case: The Justice and Development Party (AKP)

In recent years, a new Islamist political movement emerged as a political party in Turkey, which shows distinctive qualities and therefore, deserves a special attention. In Turkey the ruling party has an Islamic background and presents a unique case for the political Islam. Yilmaz expresses the unique case of AKP as follows: "The AK Party is a successful example showing that political participation and the opportunities available for the Islamist parties can generate political change, resulting in the transformation of Islamism to non-Islamism in the Turkish context" (Yilmaz, 2009:99). Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) is neither a militant organization, nor supports Taliban style regime nor aims a revolution of Iranian type. This movement formed itself as a political party. Its members are politicians, not militants. It constantly and explicitly rejects radical and militant types of Islamism, stays away from religious literalism, tries to produce a kind of conservatism with a liberal tone. AKP does not approve violence and militancy in the name of religion. The exclusion of militancy, literalism and violence gives opportunity to AKP to accommodate religiosity, plurality, democracy, secularity and modernity together. The case of AKP should not be analyzed the way Taliban or al-Qaida has been presented in the world press. Instead of a militancy presentation, AKP should be understood in terms of its political, social and cultural dimensions.

The Political Origin of AKP: The Tradition of National View (Milli Görüş)

Turkish Republic had been founded in 1923 by Atatürk as the Kemalist, nationalist ve laisist state (Mango, 2002; Lewis, 1975). Turkey was ruled by the single party, People Republican Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi-CHP) between 1923 and 1950. "The new Turkish state assumed that cultural change and modernization could be imposed from above through the force of law. One of the major expected changes was the secularization of society" (Yilmaz, 2002: 114). In this period, there was no political Islam; political life was exclusively the domain of the official ideology, namely

Kemalism. Kemalism is the official ideology of Turkey, which based on the principles of Turkish nationalism, statism and laicism. The central characteristic of Kemalism is laicism, which aims to purify social and cultural life from religion and limits religion with individual conscience. Religious freedom and pluralism is not a part of Kemalist laicism as "(t)he Turkish power elite has conceived Islam as a threat to their modernist move-ment, reforms, and progress" (Yilmaz, 2002: 130).

After 1950, Democrat Party, led by Adnan Menderes, came to power and showed a more flexible and toleasant policy toward Islamic practices. After 1970, political parties with Islamist ideas came to Turkish political arena. First party of the political Islam was National Order Party (Milli Nizam Partisi- MNP), which was closed down by Constitutional Court. Then, National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi-MSP-) was established and it became the coalition partner of People's Republic Party in 1974. After 1980, Welfare Party (Refah Partisi-RP) founded and came to power in 1995 and formed a coalition government with True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi-DYP). As a result of the heavy pressure of the institutions of the secular establishment, this coalition collapsed in 1997 and Welfare Party was closed down by Constitutional Court. This intervention has been known as '28 February Process', which expresses the military coup against Refah Party led Coalition government. After the closure of the Welfare Party, Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi) established and banned from political life like previous ones. Today, Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi-SP) represents Islamist ideas in Turkish politics.

The key figure of all these parties is Necmettin Erbakan, the former prime minister of Turkey. All these parties define themselves as the followers of *Milli Görüş*, which means *National View*. Islamism, nationalism and anti-Westernism are three main characteristics of National View ideology. The followers of Erbakan have repeatedly used the ideas of National View without making any essential revision, because National View ideology is a true way, which gives opportunity to them to express themselves as *the true Turk and true Muslim*. National View ideology categorizes Erbakan's followers as authentic Muslims and Turcs and other parties as 'the imitators of the West.'

The Birth of AKP: From National View to Conservative Democracy

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) was founded by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his friends, such as Abdullah Gül, Bulent Arınç and so on. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan served as the mayor of Istanbul and gained the extraordinary popularity among people. Tayyip Erdoğan achieved to rise as the second charismatic leader in the tradition of National View ideology after Erbakan, who has been considered by his followers as the absolute founder and leader from the beginning of the movement until today.

AKP is the fruit of many factors, such as the failure of Kemalist establishment, social and individual discovery of religiosity, the development of civic religious life, external factors, like globalisation and EU-Turkey relations, and the rise of a conservative businessmen class in Anatolia and so on (Yavuz, 2006). Although these factors are important, there is a single factor, which probably is more important than others. The Erdoğan factor is the key for the existence of AKP. The charismatic personality of Erdoğan is its real power. Without Erdoğan, AKP is like body without soul. Prime Minister Erdoğan is the most popular politician in Turkey as well as in abroad.

Although AKP and Erdoğan came from the tradition of Erbakanist National View, they are totally different from it. AKP won two general elections -November 2002 and July 2007- with high percentages of the vote. The rise of AKP demonstrates that the political Islam is no longer a marginal movement, which represents periphery in Turkey. By winning two recent general elections shows that AKP, having Islamic roots but unislamist agenda, is the only powerful political movement in the centre of Turkish politics. Erdoğan and his friends have disavowed the Islamist ideas of the National View and recast themselves as conservatives, who are pro-EU, pro-West, pro-globalisation and and pro-democracy.

Although the founders of AKP, such as Tayyip Erdoğan, Abdullah Gül –the current president of Turkey, and Bulent Arınç -the former chairman of National Assembly-, came from Islamist political tradition, they never define themselves in religious terms. Erdoğan describes himself as conservative democrat in one interview as follows : ‘We are conservative democrats. . . . our notion of conservative democracy is to attach ourselves to the customs, traditions, and values of our society, which is based on the family. . . . This is a democratic issue, not a religious issue.’ (Vincent Boland, “Eastern Premise,” *Financial Times*, 3 December 2004). They radically cut their ties with National View -Milli Görüş- tradition and redefine themselves in secular terms. AKP defines its political identity as *the Conservative Democracy*, which makes Islam not a part of its political agenda, but a part of social-cultural identity. The vocabulary of AKP’s conservative democracy belongs to the mainstream of political discourse. Conservative Democracy of AKP is a rejection of political Islam, particularly Erbakan’s rhetoric of National View-Milli Görüş-. Instead of an Islamist agenda, it tries to synthesize conservative values, such as morality, national identity, historical pride and so on, with democracy, free market economy, pluralism, the rule of law and human rights. AKP changes itself in liberal and progressive direction, at the same time it shows sensitivity about the importance of the maintaining Turkish national, cultural and religious identity and values in Turkish context.

AKP’s self-definition as conservative democrat is the representation of the great transformation regarding the role and function of religion in politics. Erdoğan

expresses the relationship between politics and religion as follows: "A political party cannot have a religion, only individuals can . . . religion is so supreme that it cannot be politically exploited or taken advantage of." (D. Sontag, "The Erdogan Experiment," *The New York Times*, 11 May 2003). We could say that AKP as a conservative democrat party is no longer the representative of political Islam. In other words, AKP is not a religionist party, but religiosity is the aspect of its many members. Making religiosity, instead of religion, is an implicit part of its political discourse is a novel development, which is one of the original dimensions of AKP ideology.

AKP says 'yes' to religiosity, but says 'no' religionism. This attitude is a necessary outcome of sociological conditions of Turkey. Although religiosity is an important aspect of individual and social life in Turkey, majority of Turkish society do not support an Islamist regime. According to a public opinion poll, 9 percent of Turkish population support state regime based on Islamic law (Çarkoğlu, Toprak, 2006:11). AKP responds the social demands of majority, not minority. Non-religionist groups also, such as the Gülen movement, reject religionism, but advocate religiosity. In other word, Turkish society demands a 'social-individual Islam', not 'political Islam' (Yilmaz, 2009:98). AKP achieved to respond this social demand through transforming its ideological roots. The adopting conservative democracy as ideological framework, instead of Islamism indicates that a party with Islamic roots, like AKP, could make new synthesis, evolve and change itself in progressive direction.

In order to evaluate AKP realistically, it is necessary to see its dynamic evolution. AKP has been often accused of having a hidden Islamist agenda by its opponents. Although this accusation constantly expressed, its opponents fail to show the concrete base for their claim. Repeating such accusation is not helpful for us to understand the phenomenon of the political Islam in the context of Turkey. What we can say that external and internal conditions influence Islamist political parties, like AKP, and force them to change themselves in liberal and progressive direction. As the case of AKP shows, sociology is ahead of ideology.

Who is against the West? AKP or Kemalist Establishment?

"Westophobia", which means anti-Westernism, is not a part of AKP's political ideology (Yilmaz, 2005:405). There is no room for political Islam in AKP's conservative democracy and AKP adopts new values, which are compatible with Western values. AKP supports free market economy, Turkey's European Union membership, the development of human rights, the constitutional reforms, liberal democracy, rule of law, religious diversity, religious freedom and so on.

The ideological transformation of AKP represents the westernization of political Islam, not the Islamization of politics. AKP cannot be described as a pro-Islamist party, because it is a pro-Western party. Especially the pro-Westernism of AKP is concrete in

its advocating policy toward Turkey's EU membership. In order to bring Turkey to close EU membership, AKP made tremendous constitutional and legal reforms more than any other previous government.

Although AKP is the strong supporter of EU, Kemalist establishment and military generals are against Turkey's membership to EU, because they believe that Turkey's EU membership will undermine their minority rule and political power. Kemalist establishment uses and propagates an anti-Europe rhetoric. On the other hand, AKP emphasizes the importance of democracy, human rights, the rule of law and EU. After witnessing AKP's tremendous reform efforts in favour of EU, European countries realize that Kemalist establishment is no longer their trusted ally, their new ally is AKP. AKP's reformist, progressive and pro-Europe policies change the perception of the Kemalism in the West as the ideology, strongly committed to Westernization is a myth, which has no truth behind it. Justice and Development Party (AKP) also discovers that its new ally against the powerful Kemalist establishment is the West, not political Islam.

AKP: The Party of the Whole Nation

AKP gets support from every region of the country without limiting itself to a particular religious, ethnic group or class. AKP has the great ability to reach the poor and marginalized groups of the isolated areas and get their support through its efficient party organisation and municipalities. The new class of businessmen, which emerges in Anatolia, is in line with AKP and backs its free market economic policies. AKP not only gets support from Muslim population, but also it has a considerable support from non-Muslim minorities. Some members of non-Muslim minorities encourage AKP to make more democratic reforms. In Kurdish cities, AKP is the only biggest party, which has the support of Kurdish people along with Kurdish party, Democratic Society Party –DTP (Now Peace and Democracy Party-BDP)-. Apart from AKP and DTP (now BDP), Kurdish population do not vote for other parties.

AKP has a good understanding of the psychological, cultural, economical and political demands of society and tries to respond all these demands in various ways. Responding various societal demands makes AKP the only party, which has public support in every part of Turkey. AKP is the only party, which could achieve to go beyond the local boundaries and became the party of the whole nation. All other parties have regional or ethnical support, but they do not get vote from all parts of the country.

The Rise of Civic Religious Life and the Rise of AKP

AKP has the support of great Sufi orders, such as the Naqşibendi, and big religious groups, like Gülen movement. The support of Naqşibendi order and Gülen movement is important, because they are very influential in society. More importantly Sufi orders

and religious groups promote a civic religious life in society and provide many services in the fields of education, health, economy and charity to a large number of people. They are a sort of grassroot organizations. Religious groups and Sufi orders provide social services to society better than the state. Through their charity activities and social-economic-cultural-educational organizations religious groups became the active player in every area of social life.

They also disapprove the politisization of religion and focus on the individual, social and cultural meaning and function of religion. AKP and these groups have a common understanding about religion. AKP seeks the support of all religious groups and avoids any conflict with them, because it is aware of their social and religious influence. Getting support from many religious groups makes possible for AKP to reach every segment of society. The development of the civic religious life brings AKP political success in local and national elections.

AKP, laicism and religious freedom

AKP is not a political party, which aims to capture the whole political power. Describing AKP as Islamists, who merely aims power, could cause some misunderstandings. AKP concentrates on the playing the rules of the democratic game and through this game obtains its demands. First of all, AKP demands to be an active influential player in political life. Then as a major player, AKP does not want to capture the *whole power structure*, but to be a *legitimate part* of power structure, which is the main desire of AKP. Because the legitimacy of AKP has not been still recognized in Kemalist circles of Turkey and some places in abroad. Recognition is the basic of demand and desire of AKP, rather than monopolizing power.

As the recognized legitimate party, AKP wants to transform the meaning and practice of laicism in Turkey. One of the primary problems of Turkey is not political Islam, but totaliter laicism. Turkish style of totaliter laicism does not make separation between state and religion, but put religion under the control of the state (White, 2002:35). Yilmaz aptly summarizes the true nature of Turkish laicism as follows: "... laicism as a concept espouses the idea that religion and state are kept distinct and separate, this Turkish version of laicism would appear to be self-contradictory. The Kemalist elite however, thought that if religion and state are non-separable components in Islam, then the best way to keep Islam out of public and political life would be to place it under the control and supervision of the state" (Yilmaz, 2005:389). Not only does Turkish laicism put religion under state control, but also it does not allow the manifestations of religion in public life (Yavuz, 2000:21-42). Turkish laicism excludes religious freedom and pluralism and it just allows some forms of worship. According to Kemalist understanding of laicism, religion is limited with the conscience of individuals and it is viewed as unnecessary in public life. The essence of Turkish

laisizm is to impose official state ideology, Kemalism, on the society and make free social life from religion (Ergil, 1995). Headscarf ban is the most important example for the Turkish laisizm, which manifests its 'anti-Muslimist character' (Halliday, 1996: 160-194).

Totaliter laisizm is one of the biggest obstacles in front of AKP's reform attempts, which aim to promote liberalization and democratization in the country. Unfortunately, every reform attempt of AKP has been labelled as threat against secular regime by Kemalist people and this rhetoric is affective among some people. Kemalist propaganda in the name of secularism interrupts many reform attempts in Turkey. The resistance of army and Kemalist circles prevents AKP to apply a reform agenda in the field of religious freedom. In contrast to Kemalist propaganda, AKP has not done anything against secular nature of the state establishment so far. Its desire is to eliminate totaliter nature of laisizm and replace totalitarianism with religious freedom and pluralism, so that people could live their religions and life-styles without facing any intervention from outside, especially from the state.

AKP between Change and Official Conservatism

Turkish political system based on a totaliterian and otoriterian ideology, namely Kemalism, which has no room for liberal democracy and sociological pluralism. Many social groups think that the state establishment does not allow a liberal democratic system, which makes the political representations of all social groups possible in politics. Furthermore, the majority of Turkish population feel alianeted and isolated by the state and believe the political establishment do not give them opportunity for fulfilling their social, cultural and economic aspirations within the framework of human rights, the rule of law and liberal democracy. Official ideology is the main source of the social exclusion and alienation, which makes people very weak and state very strong.

Some people argue that there is a struggle between Islamists and Kemalists, or a tension exists between center and periphery in Turkish political life (Mardin, 1973:169-190). Of course there is some truth in these analyses, however, beyond these dichotomies, the real struggle in Turkey is between state and society. In other words, a sharp tension exists between social sectors and state elites. Large groups of society excluded from political life throughout Turkish history. Central powers of the official establishment do not consider them as people, who could claim rights and liberties against the state. Now, these excluded groups aim to become actors in the political space through AKP. In the past, most political parties, such as Justice Party-Adalet Partisi-, True Path Party-Doğru Yol Partisi-, regarded people as their vote bank, nothing more. In the mind of many people, AKP is different from previous political parties. To them, AKP is more than a political party, because they view AKP as a social

organization of various social sectors in the form of a political party against the minority rule of the state bureaucracy.

AKP successfully captured the deep feeling of disappointment and dissatisfaction of majority people about state elites and presents itself as 'people's real party', rather than a part of the state establishment. In other words, AKP for many is the voice of society against the state. Although there is a strong demand for political change in society, the state elites try to do everything in order to prevent any reform attempt, which could weaken their power. Turkish army made four military coups -27 May 1960, 12 March 1971, 12 September 1980 and 28 February 1997- and abolished democratic political life several times. The real power in Turkish political life is army, not political parties. In such context, Justice and Development Party emerged as the new social and political center, which demands reform and change in Turkish political establishment and advocates human rights, democracy, Turkey's EU membership, minority rights and religious freedom.

Although Turkish society deprived of acute problems of freedom, democracy human rights, Turkish political establishment is still not ready to deliver people's rights and liberties. State elites show a great and effective resistance against any fundamental change in the nature and essence of the state establishment. Their insistence on the protection of the political *status quo* and their fierce resistance against any democratization attempt make AKP as the representative of the change and reform, which is the core of AKP political discourse. The need to respond to reform demands from society forces AKP to pursue liberal democratic policies, instead of an Islamist agenda.

The AKP faces a great challenge, which will determine its future. Erdoğan and his party need to make choices between these two questions: Will AKP be the harbinger of reform and change or will it be a part of the political *status quo*? At the present, civil-military elites try to make AKP an effective tool in order to strengthen their power. On the other hand, AKP is under heavy social pressure, which forces AKP to pursue more reform policies for the promotion of democracy, civil society, human rights and limited state. In recent local elections (29 March 2009) there is a small decline in the vote percentage of AKP (39 %). This small decline can be understood as a warning to AKP from society, because many voters are not happy with Erdoğan's use of official political rhetoric. AKP has to do everything in order to change state establishment in the direction of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. It should not let the powers of the *status quo* change AKP. If *status quo* changes AKP, it means its dead, but if AKP manages to change the *status quo* through democratization and liberalisation, it will win.

Conclusion

AKP achieved to be a mainstream political and social movement in Turkey. It is no longer meaningful to consider AKP as Islamism in disguise. Its ideology emphasizes more political and social issues, but less religious ones. In the light of the great transformation of AKP and Erdoğan, we could say that AKP does not belong to the era of political Islam, it is a new phenomenon, which belongs to the era of post-Islamism.

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