

# Is Islamism Compatible with Democracy?

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Articles & Testimony

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**Despite the authoritarian impulses of Turkey's long-governing AKP, the country's civil society has become too diverse for President Erdogan or any other single leader to control entirely.**

**T**he Aug. 10 election of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan as the nation's first directly elected president provides significant new fodder for the Washington debate that started following the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Soon after Iran fell under autocratic and ideological rule by Islamists, Middle East observers launched a debate to examine one hypothetical alternative: Islamist parties coming to power democratically, and more importantly, governing democratically, once elected.

The Turkish case of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government since 2002, one of the only instances where an Islamist party has come to power democratically in the broader Middle East, is perhaps the best test case for this vision. Judging from the direction the now-President Erdogan has taken Turkey in recent years, and his authoritarian emphasis on state unity as the driving force, we need to rethink assumptions about the "mesh" of democratic governance and Islamist thought.

Islamism is not a form of the Muslim faith. Rather, it is a political ideology that strives to derive legitimacy from Islam. Islamist political parties are a subset of ideologically driven political movements. Democracy, on the other hand, is based on the integrity and free choice of the individual. That free choice is manifest in the democratic act of voting, but is also characteristic of the empowerment of the individual to "seek life, liberty, and the pursuit of

happiness." More philosophically, the democratic experience places the state at the service of the individual.

Any ideological approach to governance, be it religious or philosophical, such as Marxism, is incompatible with the idea of the state working to serve a pluralistic and ever-changing populace. Under Islamism, the government necessarily becomes a "tool" for the ideological movement to enforce creed, manifest in Islam with the prohibition on renouncing religion in any form. In such a cause-based construct, the role of the individual, rather like that of a soldier in the military, is to serve the greater, transcendental cause.

Returning to Turkey, we see much of this unfolding in slow motion. When the AKP came to power in 2002, many otherwise secular Turks and outside observers gave Erdogan the benefit of doubt, throwing their support behind him and showering him with praise in the media and at international gatherings.

Those on the right, particularly in America, extended Erdogan an olive branch, viewing him as a garden-variety pious democrat who just happened to be Muslim. Liberals in Washington, Turkey and Europe, though skeptical of religion in politics, sided with Erdogan in his battle against the Turkish military, who for long had acted as the watchdog of secular politics in the country, albeit through the use of authoritarian means. The liberals wanted Erdogan to decapitate the Turkish military, whose power they hated more than they disliked Erdogan's ideology.

By helping Erdogan, the Turkish liberals at that time built the walls of their prison from within.

Exploiting a number of sham trials between 2007 and 2011, Erdogan succeeded, but not because he wanted liberal pluralism to thrive. Rather, he saw the military not as a threat to pluralism, rule of law and democratic rule, but rather a threat to the AKP's cause and his ability to carry it out. Once the military was tamed, he has acted in a fashion reminiscent of the military's past behavior regarding the primacy of the individual over the state. The difference between the AKP and the military lies only in the causes that they hope to use the state to serve.

Turkey's record on liberties, as measured by international indices, has taken a dive under the AKP. According to Freedom House, in 2001, before the AKP, Turkey ranked 58 out of 100 in terms of press freedom: 100 being the least free. In 2013, this score had dropped to 62, despite Turkey, during this period and largely to Erdogan's credit, almost tripling its real GDP and moving from a developing to a middle-income country, a status usually convivial to a more pluralistic, liberal society and state.

True, Erdogan has changed Turkey economically since coming to power in 2002. But as an Islamist ideologue, he scoffs at the idea of the individual as an end in himself independent of religious identity and therefore cannot bring forth the political transformation that the country needs in order to become a fully democratic society.

After undermining various power centers in Turkey's pluralistic society such as the judiciary, the Gulenist movement, big business and the military, it is unlikely that Erdogan will stop. Many of these institutions themselves, such as the military and the Gulenists, were no more dedicated to pluralism than Erdogan is. Still, the evolving rough "balance" and competition of these myriad institutions within Turkish society has created room for de facto pluralism. This is rapidly dissipating as Erdogan grasps for ever more power.

However, while Islamism and democracy are not compatible, in Turkey, democracy will trump Islamism.

Turkey's civil society is too diverse for Erdogan, or for that purpose, any single leader, to control entirely. Even after 12 years of Erdogan government, independent ethnic, religious and political interest groups continue to thrive, as does the business community.

And despite his authoritarianism, or perhaps because of it, Erdogan is not becoming stronger in the polls. In the last decade, the Turkish leader became popular by delivering economic growth. But since, he has plateaued: In the 2011 parliamentary elections, the AKP received 21.4 million votes. In March's nationwide local polls, it got 20.5 million votes and on August 10th, Erdogan was able to collect 20.7 million votes. This is only barely half of the voting

population.

And Turkish democracy has green shoots: Last year, millions of liberal Turks took to the streets during the Gezi Park rallies to protest Erdogan's authoritarianism. In the recent presidential election, a small Kurdish nationalist party nearly doubled its votes to 10 percent by adopting a liberal platform.

Social media is replacing conventional media, providing a bypass for Erdogan's grasp over the press. A new generation of liberals has emerged as a grassroots movement, using the power of social media to sell their vision: a truly democratic Turkey.

Furthermore, Erdogan is too much a child of an electoral system to actually challenge that cornerstone of Turkish politics as the loss of respect, particularly with Turkey's NATO allies, would be immense, and many of the less ideological of his own followers would turn against him.

And as long as free elections loom, there remains a brake on this authoritarian leader and his ideologically driven politics. In the second example of an Islamic party in a democratic system that we have in the region, in Iraq, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki displayed many of the same creeping authoritarian tendencies. But when faced with evident disaster as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria seized much of the country, and other political parties and supporters abandoned him, he bent to the will of the electorate rather than overthrow democracy. In that sense, while not exactly compatible, Islamic movements in democratic systems are pushed to adhere to basic rules such as electoral results. If that is so in a young under-stress democracy like Iraq, it is doubly so in Turkey with its free contested elections for over 60 years.

In the short term, though, the AKP's domestic trajectory puts U.S. interests under pressure. Turkey's success is of great importance to the U.S. The path to U.S. influence here is indirect. Apart from defending the principle of free elections, which as noted we do not see directly threatened, Washington cannot effectively advocate to other states how "pluralistic" they should be. The United States will need to work with Turkey just like it works with today's Egypt under the generals, but the warmth of its relationship, and its willingness to pay costs to maintain it, will depend on the survival of core democratic elements, and above all free elections. ❖

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