

Moderating Islamists: Turkey's Lessons for Egypt

by [James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](/experts/james-jeffrey), [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Jul 22, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](/experts/james-jeffrey)

Ambassador is a former U.S. special representative for Syria engagement and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey and Iraq; from 2013-2018 he was the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. He currently chairs the Wilson Center's Middle East Program.



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

The Turkish coup of 1980 demonstrates that army intervention can restore democracy in some cases, while Turkey's generally successful development since then illustrates the role that the military, other institutions, and the international community can play in moderating Islamist movements.

The ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt invites comparison to Turkey's 1980 army coup, and to the "Turkish model" of democracy that unfolded in its wake. Following that intervention, the Turkish military played a stabilizing role during the transition process, while the country's Islamist parties eventually moderated through political participation. Can Turkey's 1980 coup provide a roadmap for Egypt in the months ahead? More broadly, can Turkey's overall democratic experience be repeated there?

THE MILITARY AS ARBITER

The Turkish coup stands out as perhaps the most successful of the region's many military interventions over the past two generations. While the details may differ, the Egyptian and Turkish coups were generated by the same basic forces: extreme social polarization, a growing belief that the government was completely dysfunctional, and the specter of civil violence. While some aspects of the Turkish military's actions have long been controversial, the population broadly supported the intervention at the time. One reason was that the military clearly put the country on a path back to civilian democratic rule, resulting in free elections in 1983 and a new prime minister, Turgut Ozal, who had run as a candidate from the leading Muslim conservative party in the 1977 elections.

To be sure, the military's roundup of dissidents was severe, and its handling of the Kurdish population helped transform the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) into a potent insurgent threat beginning in 1984. Nevertheless, the military imposed restraints on its authoritarian rule. Soon after taking power, it issued a roadmap for returning to normalcy, which involved drafting a constitution, holding a national referendum on the document in 1982 (resulting in over 90 percent approval), and holding parliamentary elections the following year. Although members of the previous government and parliament were arrested, held for some years, and banned from holding office, they were not put on trial or otherwise criminalized. Moreover, the vast bulk of ruling-party faithful were able to reengage politically (including Ozal, who was spared the ban by losing his 1977 bid for a parliamentary seat). Likewise, banned parties soon returned more or less disguised, and parliament formally overturned the bans some years later.

The military did try to keep its hand on the levers of power, picking an inexplicably inept officer, Gen. Turgut Sunalp, to run for prime minister in 1983. But when Ozal's Motherland Party won overwhelmingly, the military respected the outcome and transferred power to its least-desired candidate.

The transition to full multiparty democracy was gradual, however, and the military remained a grand arbiter of Turkish politics. With the help of high courts, it banned a string of Islamist parties for rejecting secular democracy and violating the new constitution. Ironically, these efforts produced a moderate Islamist movement, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which captured broad popular support by moving to the center, then used this power to cripple the military and end its role in politics.

Aside from its controversial crackdown on dissidents and Kurds, the Turkish military's handling of the post-coup transition would not be a bad model for the Egyptian military. Of course, Turks had thirty years of experience with democratic rule prior to the coup, and the country had long been anchored in a network of Western institutions (including NATO). But the West has key institutional and security arrangements with Egypt as well, many of which could be expanded.

DYNAMICS OF MODERATION

Now that it has been forcibly toppled, will Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood moderate, embracing democracy and moving toward the center? Turkey's experience with the AKP proves that this is plausible. Yet it also shows that such moderation takes place not because Islamists volunteer for it, but because strong checks and balances -- domestic and foreign -- impose it.

In the years following the 1980 coup, judicial bans on undemocratic religious parties gave Turkish Islamists no choice but to moderate, especially since the bans were supported by the military, powerful liberal business groups, secular parties, and a vibrant pro-Western media. When groups such as the National Salvation Party were shut down after the coup, Islamists formed a more moderate faction, the Welfare Party (RP). After making significant electoral gains over the years, the RP was eventually banned in 1998 for pursuing a religious agenda. This spurred the creation of the Virtue Party (FP), which offered a toned-down version of the RP's rhetoric. The FP was banned in 2001, however, leading RP/FP leader and former prime minister Necmettin Erbakan to further moderate his rhetoric and reincarnate the movement as the Felicity Party (SP) in 2001.

Europe played a role in this gradual moderation as well. Turkey had long accepted the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) as its highest court, so when the RP and FP were banned, they took their cases there for appeal. Yet the ECHR upheld the bans in a 2001 decision, writing, "We willingly accept the government's argument concerning the vital importance of secularism in Turkish society," pointing out that Turkey was the "the only state with a substantially Islamic population which adheres to the principles of a liberal democracy."

These internal and external dynamics produced the AKP, Turkey's current ruling party. When Erbakan sought to perpetuate his Islamist movement via the SP in July 2001, many of his former cadres decided a new approach was in

order. After breaking with him and taking much of the RP/FP party machinery with them, they established the AKP in August 2001. While largely rooted in its more expressly Islamist forebears, the AKP put forth a moderate political platform in the 2002 elections in order to woo centrist voters and convince the populace that it was not a religious party. The AKP also saw an opening in the 2001 economic crisis -- the worst such crisis in modern Turkish history, and a major factor in discrediting the secular parties in power at the time.

This strategy worked: whereas the RP had peaked at 21 percent of the vote in the 1995 elections, the AKP received 34 percent in 2002. The evolution in the AKP's message swayed voters who had likely never supported an Islamist party in the past. For instance, the RP had never received more than 5 percent of the vote in the left-leaning city of Izmir, but the AKP won 17 percent there.

The AKP's success also stemmed from its decision to establish a leadership composed of new faces, such as Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President Abdullah Gul, and Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc. Unlike Erdogan, who had developed a "brand" of calling for sharia since the 1970s, these new names were better positioned to convince Turks that they would not pursue an Islamist or radical agenda. This suggests that the Brotherhood's future prospects in Egypt will depend on its ability to raise new leadership unstained by the movement's past rhetoric and policies.

MODERATING THE BROTHERHOOD?

The Turkish example offers several lessons regarding the Brotherhood's potential moderation in Egypt:

- *Islamist parties moderate when they are allowed to remain in the political game.* Although courts shut down Turkey's Islamist parties a number of times, they also gave these parties the option to run in future elections under a more-moderate platform.
- *Islamist parties do not accept moderation unless it is imposed on them.* Even if the Brotherhood is included in Egypt's democratic process going forward, it will not truly moderate unless strong checks and balances are put in place, including a constitution mandating respect for democratic principles, a free and rigorous media, and independent courts. Turkey's recent tribulations following Erdogan's crackdown on the Gezi Park protests illustrate what happens when years of brilliant electoral and economic success erode the natural antidotes to accretion of power.
- *Islamist parties moderate if their platform fails,* as measured by whether or not they receive the votes necessary for coming to power.
- *Ties with Europe and the United States can play a role in moderating Islamist parties.* This has been the case in Turkey, though one key incentive for cooperation with the West -- the dangerous security situation that Ankara usually faces (e.g., the war next door in Syria) -- has been largely missing in Egypt since 1979.

CONCLUSION

Turkey and Egypt are different countries, of course, so Ankara's experience with Islamist parties may not necessarily apply in Cairo. Still, the Muslim Brotherhood may yet follow the AKP's path of moderation if the right conditions prevail: namely, if the political system (and, in particular, the new rulers in uniform) give the group space to compete in the next elections; if the next constitution guarantees democratic freedoms while allowing the country's high court to monitor and reprimand parties that do not adhere to these principles; and if the Brotherhood itself is able to find new leadership that embraces such an agenda.

As mentioned above, however, the Turkish example also suggests that while Islamist parties may moderate in order to come to power, they are often tempted to move back to the far right once their popularity is cemented, re-embracing illiberalism and a majoritarian view of democracy. Since the AKP came to power as a moderate force, effective governance has helped it build further support, culminating in 49.5 percent of the vote in the 2011

elections. Yet this support has sometimes led the party to stray from its erstwhile moderate platform, as seen in government efforts to curb dissent and legislate social conservatism. In other words, the moderation of Islamist parties in democracies might be more tactical than strategic. Recent mass protests against the AKP's style of governance suggest that the Turkish example is a work in progress -- but also that strong antibodies to a majoritarian Islamist relapse can be cultivated within a true democratic system.

Despite its long-term PKK insurgency, current political woes, and other concerns, Turkey has been an overall democratic success since the 1980 coup, as well as a stable, strong, and helpful U.S. ally. Washington should expect Egypt to meet the same standard.

James F. Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz distinguished visiting fellow at The Washington Institute and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey. Soner Cagaptay is the Institute's Beyer Family fellow and director of its Turkish Research Program.



RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Egypt (/policy-analysis/egypt)

North Africa (/policy-analysis/north-africa)

Turkey (/policy-analysis/turkey)