

Turkish Lessons for the Arab Spring

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Islamist parties can moderate their platforms, but only with free elections and the checks of an independent media and strong opposition parties.

Turkey's Justice and Development Party, a coalition of Islamists and conservatives known as the AKP, won the country's general elections for the third consecutive time since 2002 on Sunday, albeit with a reduced majority. That's a milestone: The AKP is now the longest-serving government since Turkey became a multi-party democracy in 1946. And it makes the party's bumpy, decade-long marriage of political Islam and democracy worth a closer look, especially given the popular upheavals rippling through other Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East.

The AKP won and held power by moving to the political center and toward economic liberalism. Recep Tayyip Erdogan founded the party in 2001 on the ashes of the Islamic Welfare Party, an illiberal predecessor, and promised to join the European Union, reform the economy and get rid of the draconian, anti-free-press sections of Turkey's penal code. The strategy paid off: The AKP won 34% of the popular vote in 2002. In 2007, as its economic reforms took root, the party extended its grip on power.

But not all of the AKP's success was due to its policies. Its long tenure has been immeasurably helped by the weakness of the opposition, secular Republican People's Party, or CHP. Its former leaders provided no viable liberal alternative to the AKP's platform, offering Turks instead platitudes and pro-status quo nationalism, while dismissing free-market ideas. The CHP's empty platform, coupled with AKP's increasing popularity, only fed into Mr. Erdogan's authoritarian streak.

And what a streak it was: Mr. Erdogan interpreted his 2007 victory as a green light to limit freedoms and harass his opponents. After amending the country's constitution in 2010, the AKP single-handedly appointed a majority of the high court without a confirmation process. The new, post-2007 AKP has also attacked the media. According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe report, Turkey leads the world in jailing journalists, with 57 currently behind bars. Just before the elections, Mr. Erdogan warned two prominent columnists, Nuray Mert and Abbas Guclu, that "they will pay after the elections." Ms. Mert had criticized Mr. Erdogan for not having a Kurdish policy, and Mr. Guclu had reported on irregularities in college entrance exams.

The opposition has finally figured out how to counter this radical agenda, thanks primarily to the election of a new party leader, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, last year. Mr. Kilicdaroglu has morphed the CHP into a mass liberal party in a very short period of time. He has built bridges with Turkey's powerful business community and recruited its representatives to the party's leadership. He has wooed back labor unions to the party's executive organs. The CHP now boasts a record number of women in its leadership and more importantly, on grassroots level. Last but not least, the party has a fresh approach to the festering Kurdish problem, such as the recent proposal to implement Kurdish education in schools.

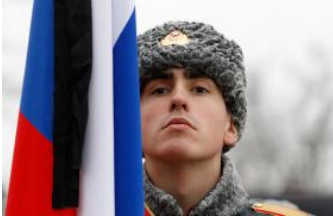
The question now is where Turkey will go from here. The AKP's recent history shows that majority or near-majority popular support leads Islamist parties and illiberal political movements to re-embrace their authoritarian antecedents. Once in power, Islamist parties regress, for they interpret popular support as the green light to implement their radical agendas. The AKP equates winning elections with democracy. Hence, once it achieved popularity the AKP went after checks and balances, which it sees as an affront to popular support that needs to be eliminated.

Turkish voters, by and large, reject this radical agenda. On Sunday, although the AKP won the elections, for the first time since 2002 the party lost the required 330-seat majority needed to pass legislation in the Turkish parliament. This is the first legislative session since 2002 in which the AKP will have to seek consensus to make new laws. Mr. Erdogan conceded this point, saying his party "will reach out to and respect the lifestyle of all Turkish citizens," which equates to a promise of working with the opposition.

The sine qua non of a potentially successful marriage between Islamist politics and democracy is a strong liberal partner. The new CHP could not only protect Turkish democracy, but also, ironically, might save the AKP from itself by checking the very popularity that lies at the root of that party's authoritarianism. The lesson for the rest of the Middle East is exactly this: Islamist parties can moderate their platforms, but only if elections are free, if media is independent and if there is a strong liberal party that counters the Islamists' desire to equate democracy with unchecked power.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the [Turkish Research Program \(/template102.php?\)](#)

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