

Beware the 'Turkish Model'

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The lesson of the AKP experience for the Arab world and likely Muslim Brotherhood governments is that religious orthodoxy is an ideological beauty contest, in which the winner is always the ugly guy.

The so-called "Turkish model," in which an Islamist party heads an ostensible democracy, has been posited in recent weeks as a likely outcome in post-authoritarian Arab countries. Likely, maybe; but Turkey's experience under the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, suggests that such a path may also be a slippery slope.

The AKP does not aim to create a fundamentalist state in Turkey, but the ruling party's conservative policies might inadvertently lead to just that. For several years the AKP has been transforming Turkish society by making religion the moral compass of the country's body politic. This does not mean that the AKP wants to turn Turkey into a theocracy. But the problem is that once narrowly-defined faith becomes a guiding principle in policy, fundamentalists claiming ideological purity become more competitive politically. Their demands for an even stricter implementation of religion-based rules and values are triggering an ideological purity race and risk pushing Turkish society toward radicalization. History teaches us that fundamentalists always defeat conservatives in any competition for ideological purity. In the 11th century, the religiously conservative Almoravid movement swept the Muslim kingdom of Andalusia in reaction to its liberal ways, especially its embrace of progressive thought and acceptance of non-Muslims. Upon taking over Andalusia, the Almoravids enshrined their illiberal interpretation of Islam as the moral compass of society.

But the Almoravids' brand of conservatism was soon seen as too lax by even more fundamentalist Muslims. The Almohads emerged to protest what they considered the Almoravids' "tolerance," and their takeover of Andalusia radicalized the society, leading to the persecution of non-Muslims and to religious warfare.

Turkey's Islamization under the AKP threatens to follow a similar, if more gradual, trajectory. The AKP's embrace of religious values is not Turkish secularists' biggest problem. The larger threat is that, now that the AKP has centered religion within Turkish society, fundamentalists will gain carte blanche to challenge the AKP as "not Muslim enough." Already last November, the AKP was moved to fire Ali Bardakoglu, the liberal head of Diyanet, Turkey's official religious authority which has historically checked fanaticism by building mosques and training imams while promoting a liberal understanding of Islam. The AKP replaced Mr. Bardakoglu with another well-known scholar, Mehmet Gormez, who has an avowedly more conservative take on Islam.

The new Diyanet chief's first act was to fire Ayse Sucu, who headed the organization's women's branch. Ms. Sucu's initiatives had included suggesting that women should be able to decide for themselves whether to cover their hair. Fundamentalist media and pundits were ecstatic at her ousting, claiming that it signalled that there is no room for a personal interpretation of Islam.

Internally, the AKP has promoted socially conservative values, such as wearing the Islamic headscarf for women and a disdain for alcohol. Turkish bureaucrats and businesspeople complain that embracing these practices to prove that one is a "good Muslim" has become a precondition for getting government promotions and contracts.

Meanwhile, the AKP-run media watchdog recently scolded a television station for broadcasting a program about Suleyman the Magnificent that truthfully depicted the famously cosmopolitan Ottoman sultan drinking alcohol. The official warning followed an outcry led by AKP leaders and fundamentalists alike, who demanded that the show be banned. Radicals now have the upper hand to slowly end Turkey's centuries-old drinking culture. Or take the AKP's new Kurdish policy. In an effort to expand its base among the Kurds before June polls, the party has emphasized Islam as a common denominator between Kurds and Turks to undermine the secular Kurdish nationalist party.

The plan may well help the AKP win its upcoming elections. However, it will also invite competition from religious radicals, such as from Kurdish Hezbollah -- a violent Sunni group not linked to the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah, which already boasts a wide grassroots network in the southeast of Turkey.

Recently, Hezbollah's leadership, in jail since a crackdown in the late 1990s, was released from prison due to a legal loophole. The AKP's emphasis on Islam may help replace the secular-nationalist Kurdish movement with a religious-nationalist one. Expect Kurdish Hezbollah to suggest that neither the AKP nor Diyanet are "Muslim enough" to represent Kurds.

Turkey's shift is also bad news for the U.S. and Europe. The potential radicalization of the Turkish population is an especially pressing concern given that Turkey recently eliminated visa restrictions for a number of Muslim countries -- including Iran, Syria, Jordan and Libya. Whatever happens in those countries, the move will facilitate cross-fertilization among radical groups in Turkey. Washington should make contingency plans now to deal with radicals who will challenge the AKP's cooperation with the United States, particularly in Afghanistan.

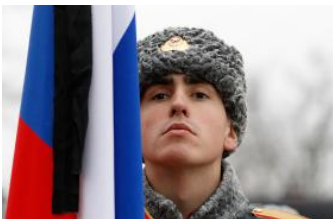
Turkey's emboldened radicals will also no doubt take issue with Ankara's European Union policy, as if Turkey's EU accession plans did not already face enough problems. Given the large number of Turkish immigrants in Europe, the radicalization of the Turkish population, especially its Kurdish segment, will likely replicate itself in Europe.

The AKP's religious bent, disconcerting in itself, can easily spin out of control. The lesson of the AKP experience for the Arab world and likely Muslim Brotherhood governments there is that religious orthodoxy is an ideological beauty contest, in which the winner is always the ugly guy.

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