

Turkey's New 'Old Kemalists'

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Articles & Testimony

Using its unbridled control over the executive, legislative, and now judicial branches and the media, the AKP has eliminated Kemalists, and now aims to shape Turkish society in its own narrowly conservative and authoritarian image.

The Arab revolts of 2011 awakened interest in the Turkish model, exemplifying an Islamist-rooted party building a liberal democracy. Turkey's experience with the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, government since 2002 shows quite the opposite.

When the AKP came to power, some saw it as an opportunity to end Kemalism and liberalize the country. They suggested that the AKP, rooted in Turkey's Islamist opposition, would move beyond rigid Kemalism, creating a truly liberal democracy. Some added that the AKP would also shed illiberal Kemalist traditions, such as its nationalist foreign policy line on European Union accession, as well as its taboos surrounding the Armenian issue.

The AKP did not move Turkey beyond Kemalism. Instead, the party destroyed Kemalists, while at the same time it perpetuated old Kemalism's taboos and attitudes and abandoned its liberal ideals, such as gender equality. Hence, a decade after the AKP assumed power, Turkey has become more illiberal. The old Kemalists are out and the "new" old Kemalists are in. The AKP's "new" old Kemalists do not share any of Kemalism's pro-Western tendencies and have plenty of illiberalism to spare.

Take, for instance, the Armenian issue: When the AKP came to power, some maintained that the AKP could normalize Turkey's ties with Armenia and open a liberal debate on the fateful events of 1915 in the Ottoman Empire. The AKP initially toyed with the idea of rapprochement -- to the extent of involving U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to broker a deal in 2009, only to break its promise later.

Another illustrative lesson in AKP intentions can be drawn from a recent visit by AKP leader and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Kars, a town on the Turkish-Armenian border. Erdogan commented on a statue, a symbol of Turkish-Armenian friendship depicting two abstract characters in shared agony, calling the statue "a freak show" and requesting that it be destroyed. So much for casting out old Kemalism's taboos: the AKP perpetuates these taboos, even if it eliminated Kemalists.

Nor has the AKP abandoned old Kemalism's nationalist stance in its foreign policy. Rather, the party has maintained this posture, and even moved beyond it to the point of undermining Turkey's historic goal of joining the EU.

Initially, the AKP pursued EU accession, though it now appears this was a tactical choice intended to allay fears about the AKP's political identity as an Islamist party. When Turkey entered membership talks in 2005 and the idea of a liberal society appeared within reach, the AKP backpedaled.

What is worse, the party is now fanning anti-European sentiments. Recently, the AKP's chief negotiator for EU accession warned that Europe risks "emulate[ing] the fascist methods of the 1930s." The power of such rhetoric should not be underestimated: according to a recent German Marshall Fund poll, 74 percent of Turks supported EU accession in 2004 while only 38 percent supported membership in 2010.

The AKP's "new" old Kemalism is painfully un-European. Take, for instance, gender equality: In 1994, 15 percent of executive civil service positions were held by women, according to IRIS, an Ankara-based women's rights group. This number has since decreased to 11 percent. While 33 percent of all lawyers in Turkey are women, not a single woman exists among the nine top bureaucrats in Turkey's Justice Ministry. Contrast this with the large number of female jurists in the country's high courts where, until recently, judges were appointed by their peers rather than the government. Nearly half of the members of the Council of State, Turkey's top administrative court, are women. A recent amendment to the constitution gives the AKP the right to singlehandedly appoint judges to the high court, which will effectively end judicial independence and further erode women's rights.

Lastly, consider the AKP's record on freedom of expression. Recently, it started an investigation into comments by Suheyl Batum, deputy chair of main opposition Republican People's Party, or CHP, founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Speaking on the Turkish military's diminishing role in politics, Batum said that the "military is like a paper tiger." The AKP reacted with efforts to press criminal charges against Batum for "insulting the military." Here is the ultimate proof that the AKP enshrines "new" old Kemalism: the party is investigating a Kemalist for criticizing a Kemalist institution!

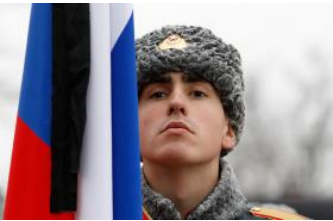
After nearly a decade in power, the AKP has not eliminated Turkey's taboos, embraced Europe, or increased freedoms. Instead, using its unbridled control over the executive, legislative and now judicial branches and the media, the party has eliminated Kemalists, and now aims to shape Turkish society in its own narrowly conservative and authoritarian image. In other words, the old Kemalists are gone and the "new" old Kemalists are in charge of Ankara.

Turkey and the Arab countries are different in many ways, and it is difficult to draw direct analogies. However, if Turkey's experience under the AKP proves anything, one should not expect Islamist parties to build liberal societies after the great Arab revolt is over.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the [Turkish Research Program \(/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](#) at the Washington Institute. ❖

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