

Turkey's New a la Carte Nerve

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Have doubts that Turkey has changed since the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, assumed power in 2002? A look at what arouses popular anger in Turkey today reveals a society in flux -- one rapidly adopting new and risky political sensitivities.

In the past, actions considered offensive to Turkish national identity, such as support for outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, terror attacks, would have been a virtual casus belli for the Turks. Not anymore. Recent WikiLeaks reports have disclosed that Russia has been helping arm the PKK, producing barely a raised eyebrow from the Turkish public -- a far cry from the angry protests that would have been expected in years past.

Today's Turks are focused on taking issue with people and ideas they consider offensive to Muslims. While a negative reaction to perceived anti-Muslim sentiments is understandable from the Turkish people's perspective, this new morality is based on a la carte morals and selective outrage: Turks take issue with perceived offensive behavior by Westerners against Muslims, but they give carte blanche to similar behavior by Muslims against Westerners or even against fellow Muslims.

The roots of this new selective morality lie in the transformation of the Turkish identity under the AKP. In decades past, the Turks considered themselves both Muslim and Western simultaneously, for they saw no conflict between these identities. Now, however, many Turks view the two identities as being mutually exclusive. Increasingly, many are siding with a politically defined "Muslim world" as opposed to the West.

Accordingly, contemporary Turkish society is outraged by Westerners whom they consider offensive, but can turn a blind eye to Muslims who transgress others' rights, even including those of fellow Muslims.

Take for instance recent Turkish reactions to a visit by acclaimed film director Emir Kusturica and Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir. The former, a Bosnian who stood with the Yugoslav National Army as it slaughtered Bosnians in the 1990s, was driven out of Turkey in October by AKP government-led protests, resulting in threats against his life. The latter Sudanese leader, who was indicted for genocide by the International Criminal Court in July, was gracefully hosted by the AKP government in Istanbul. While Kusturica's views are hardly laudable, the actions of the Turkish government and the non-reaction of the Turkish public to Bashir's visit are indicative of the unfortunate moral double standard that has taken hold in Turkey.

This trend underlines the new Turkish outrage that takes issue with Westerners and non-Muslims whose views are considered offensive. Another similar case was the treatment of Nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul, who was invited to a writers' conference that was held in November in Istanbul. However, as the date approached, pro-government media began a public character assassination campaign, targeting Naipaul as a "Muslim hater." The proof: Naipaul's Nobel Prize-winning novels! In the end, the conference committee uninvited Naipaul to the Istanbul event.

As the Naipaul case shows, Turkey's new moral sensitivities target not just individuals but also ideas considered offensive to Muslims. Perhaps it is only a passing phenomenon; but if long lasting, this is an alarming trend for it points to a new and irate Turkish attitude toward the West and its ideas.

Part of the explanation for this phenomenon lies in the nature of Turkish society. In general, there are three ways contemporary societies relate to the outside world. First, there are "open societies with open minds," i.e. technologically and politically connected societies that are open to new ideas coming from the outside even if such ideas might be unorthodox. Second, there are "closed societies with closed minds" -- as hypothetical as this prototype might be -- such as dictatorships that block outside influence and create closed-circuit epistemological environments. Finally, there are "open societies with closed minds," such as Turkey; these societies, though functionally integrated into a globalized world, are unwelcoming to people and ideas coming from the outside.

Add to this mixture Turkey's new activist foreign policy that stimulates solidarity with a politically defined "Muslim world," and you arrive at the current state of Turkey's societal relationship with Western values.

When the AKP launched its foreign policy soon after 2002, with efforts to increase Turkish involvement in Middle East conflicts, many saw it as a positive development. This initiative was predicted to serve as an important bridge between the West and the Muslim world, and the AKP could finally realize its merit as a regional leader and its ability to enrich both Turkey's Western and Muslim identities.

Unfortunately these predictions proved premature. The last decade has shown that the AKP's policies do not envision a Turkey that guides Muslim nations into the West. Rather, the party has shown that its goal is to frequently rally Muslim nations and causes against the West. This has led to a chasm between Turkey's two identities, with most Turks taking issue with the West. Coupled with the closed-circuit nature of Turkish society, this attitude is rapidly restructuring the Turks' relationship with the West, as well as stimulating anti-Western tendencies.

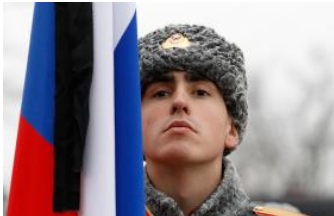
Barring a radical change, a singular focus on anti-Muslim sentiment will continue to be a defining characteristic of Turkish public discourse for the foreseeable future, much to the detriment of Turkish society as a whole.

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