

Turkish Model for Egypt

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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



Articles & Testimony

Egypt's transition toward a post-Hosni Mubarak era, as incremental and painful as it might be, has sparked interest in the "Turkish model" of democracy-craft, i.e. the art of conducting democratic affairs, which in Turkey involves the military playing a stabilizing role during the transition process while Islamist parties moderate through political participation. Can Turkey's experience be repeated in Egypt?

Turkey and Egypt have different histories, and it would be unwise to draw precise parallels between the two. However, Turkey's experience can provide lessons for Egypt after Mubarak.

The first: the military's role during the transition to multi-party democracy. Following the 1960 and the 1980 coups, Turkey established a political system in which the military and the civilians worked together during the transition to democracy. In both cases, the chief of the military became the president. Concurrently, a Cabinet, composed of respected, mostly non-partisan figures, was appointed to share power with the president. In both cases, an assembly was elected with a mandate to draft a new constitution. After the new constitution was approved in a referendum, free and fair elections were held in 1961 and 1983, thereby transitioning to democracy.

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.

Should Egypt's transition to democracy follow Turkey's model, the military would take over the presidency and a civilian national unity government that shares power with the military would form. Mirroring Turkey's constitutional reform process, Egypt would draft a new constitution and prepare the groundwork for free and fair elections.

But, first, a caveat: Turkey had many well-established mass political parties prior to 1960 and 1980, whereas today, Egypt does not. During Turkey's transitional phase, these parties simply reconstituted themselves. Egypt has no well-established mass parties apart from the Muslim Brotherhood, which has used the sanctity of the mosque, a luxury denied to other parties, for grassroots organization.

Due to suppression in Egypt over the past six decades, major political parties would need to be reformed, or in some cases, formed from scratch. Egyptian elections held in the near future might be free and fair, but the political field between the Muslim Brotherhood and other parties would not necessarily be level, unless the liberal opposition were to receive political and financial support from the West on par with what the Muslim Brotherhood has been receiving and will receive from its international network.

The Turkish model provides another lesson -- caveat emptor: Following a military-shepherded transition to democracy, the military's candidates lose in the polls in Turkey.

Still, while the military's weight in politics officially ended with the transition to democracy in Turkey, the military retained some influence. Even after free and fair elections were held to appoint a prime minister as the chief executive, the former head of the military who was president retained this now symbolic position until the end of his term. The transition to multi-party democracy was gradual; not black or white, but gray. In fact, the military's influence on politics dissipated, but did not entirely wither away until the rise of the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, government in 2002.

This brings us to the second aspect of the Turkish model: Will the Muslim Brotherhood be moderate, ala AKP, embrace secular liberal democracy and adopt a friendly attitude toward the United States and the West?

Turkey's experience with the AKP proves that this is plausible. However, it also shows that such moderation takes place not because the Islamists volunteer for it, but because strong checks and balances impose it on the movement. For example, Turkish Islamists decided to moderate, jettisoning their anti-American, anti-European rhetoric, and recognized secular democracy only after the country's Constitutional Court shut down the Islamist Welfare Party in 1998 and its successor, the Virtue Party, in 2001.

In this endeavor the courts were supported by the popular military, the powerful liberal business lobbies, secular parties and a vibrant pro-Western media. This process of moderation produced the AKP, which put forth a moderate political platform in the 2002 polls that looked more like the manifesto of a conservative democratic party than that of the AKP's illiberal predecessors. The AKP won the 2002 elections.

After almost a decade in power though, the AKP's moderation has reversed. The party has turned authoritarian toward the opposition: Anti-government

protestors are beaten up by security forces, opposition figures are wiretapped, and independent papers get slapped with punitive tax fines lest their coverage of the AKP adopt a critical tone. Private businesses not supportive of the government are terrorized by selective tax audits. And the once-popular military is losing its appeal since the AKP came forth with the Ergenekon case, alleging that the military was involved in a nefarious coup plot. The AKP has effectively neutered the military. Not just high-ranking officers, but also the government's critics among academics have come under assault, ending up in prison without an indictment or solid evidence proving their involvement in a coup plot.

The AKP's successful assault on checks and balances -- as a final step, the party is reshaping the judiciary in its own political image by single-handedly appointing judges to the high courts -- that forced its predecessor to moderate explains how the party's un-moderation is possible. Whereas Turkish Islamists moderated because strong checks and balances forced them to do so, this moderation ended once these checks and balances were marginalized.

In other words, Islamists are moderate not necessarily because the political tendency is built into the movement's genetic code, but more frequently because moderation is imposed upon them. The lesson here for post-Mubarak Egypt is that the Muslim Brotherhood, if it were included in the democratic process, could be moderate and recognize liberal democracy, but only if strong checks and balances were to enforce its moderation. Turkey provides post-Mubarak Egypt with a useful list of dos and don'ts indeed; now Egyptians will have to decide how much to borrow from the "Turkish model" of democracy-craft.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the [Turkish Research Program \(/templateI02.php?](#)

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