

New Kemalism: Religious but Not Conservative

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Jan 3, 2011

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Articles & Testimony

The CHP has to reinvent itself as the party of secularism, to find a place where it can be at peace with religion but also promote socially liberal values.

Can the Republican People's Party, or CHP, Turkey's main opposition movement and the heir of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's legacy of a Western and secular Turkey, challenge the governing Justice and Development Party, or AKP, in the upcoming 2011 elections?

Ever since coming to power in 2002, the AKP has successfully injected social conservatism and anti-Western values into the country's social life and foreign policy, and done so with growing popular support. So, can the CHP hope to defeat the AKP in the forthcoming June Turkish vote?

Until last year, the answer was no, for the outdated and tired CHP was unable to put forth a convincing vision of how Turkey should evolve as opposed to the AKP's moving model.

Now though, things are different: first, in May 2010, the CHP elected the new and charismatic leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu. Then, recently, Mr. Kilicdaroglu won enough support from CHP delegates to form a new party assembly composed of fresh new faces, including a 26-year-old woman with a Ph.D., diplomats from Turkey's pro-Western Foreign Ministry, as well as businesswomen, union leaders, liberal college professors and economists. Despite earlier predictions the old CHP guard would prevent Mr. Kilicdaroglu from having his vision of a "New Kemalism" -- a liberal and updated version of modern Turkey's founding ideology -- elected to the party assembly, Mr. Kilicdaroglu has succeeded in changing the CHP's top echelons.

Since Turkish political parties are top-down structures, this means the CHP will now change from the top down in the run up to the 2011 elections. For the first time since 2002, the AKP faces a real challenge from a renewed opposition that, unlike its predecessor, is forward-looking, with a vision to create a new, liberal and pro-Western Turkey.

This is good news for democracy in Turkey. Ever since the AKP assumed power, analysts had been worried by two problems in the Turkish political system: an increasingly authoritarian ruling party that tramples over democratic checks and balances, for instance punishing independent media with tax fines, and an ineffective opposition unable to define its vision of where Turkey should go if not along the AKP path.

Now, the second problem seems to be alleviated -- at least in part until the new CHP defines a relationship between religion, conservatism, and a secular polity -- the CHP is in a position to compete against the AKP's working model of a socially conservative society in which religiosity is a growing source of political legitimacy.

A fact that is missing to most observers of politics in Muslim countries -- and in fact to most Muslims and Turks -- is that conservatism and religiosity are not conjoined twins. One can be religious and not conservative, or conservative but not religious.

Yet the AKP defines the two as interchangeable in the Turkish context. Take for instance, the story of a young woman in Istanbul of mixed Muslim-Greek Orthodox heritage. This woman told me she had applied for a job with a branch of the AKP-controlled Istanbul municipality. At her job interview the woman was told the AKP government would hire her if she agreed to wear an Islamic-style headscarf. When she responded that she was also Greek-Orthodox, she was told, "You don't need to convert; all you have to do is cover your head."

This exhibits just how the AKP is successfully juxtaposing religiosity with social conservatism. And through this strategy, the party is gaining legitimacy in a mostly religious society while driving conservatism across the board. In order to challenge this strategy and set up a serious alternative to the AKP in the polls, the CHP must de-couple social conservatism from religiosity and thus end the AKP's monopoly over the "the party of religion" brand.

This way, Mr. Kilicdaroglu's New Kemalism can uphold the separation of religion and government, while taking advantage of the distinction between social conservatism and religiosity. Turks are by definition a religious people; opinion polls show that over 90 percent of Turks believe in God. The CHP has to make peace with this fact, adjusting its vision of secularism to accommodate religious practice. Yet, at the same time, New Kemalism ought to be clear on social conservatism. While there is nothing wrong with social conservatism per se, when imposed by a government -- as demonstrated by the experience of the aforementioned Muslim-Greek Orthodox woman -- it is incompatible with the idea of liberal Western society New Kemalism wishes to represent.

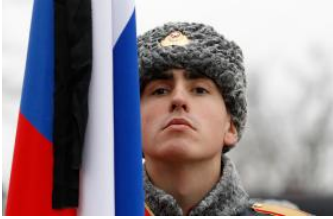
In other words, the CHP has to reinvent itself as the party of secularism, to find a place where it can be at peace with religion, but also promote socially liberal values. Then, Mr. Kilicdaroglu would not only be in a position to challenge the AKP but also bask in the glory of achieving a first for a political party in any Muslim society, unhitching religiosity and social conservatism. With this, Mr. Kilicdaroglu's New Kemalism would also open the path for a liberal-religious polity in a predominantly Muslim society. This is indeed a tall order, but then it is the only way the CHP can win the forthcoming election.

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