

## The Battle for Turkey's Future:

### Liberals vs. Neo-Liberals

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Articles & Testimony

**A**s Turkey continues its soul search on what it means to be a liberal democracy, Turkish liberals have come to a crossroads. They threw their support behind the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, in 2002 when it came to power.

At that time, the AKP renounced its illiberal Islamist roots, promising to consolidate Turkey's liberal democracy. Seven years later, that promise awaits fulfillment, and the liberals have to decide where to go. The liberal camp is split between liberals who see the AKP as not interested in furthering Turkey's evolution towards a more liberal society, and neo-liberals who continue supporting the AKP in hope of throwing out the old Turkey and creating an entirely new liberal society. Which of these visions will move Turkey forward?

Initially after 2002, all liberals supported the AKP when the party pushed for European Union accession. Turkey's EU accession is today stalled. To be fair, this problem is as much due to French president Nicolas Sarkozy's veto against Turkish membership as it is due to the AKP's loss of appetite for the EU. Still, just as Turkey began membership talks with the EU in October 2005, the party's drive for European membership waned. Populist instincts led the AKP to shy away from unpopular economic and social reforms needed to enter the EU.

More importantly, the AKP was upset by the European Court of Human Rights' November 2005 decision to uphold Turkey's ban on Islamic style headscarves on college campuses. The party had hoped that Europe would help it recalibrate Turkey's secularism, but the decision signaled that Europe was content with the status quo.

Though Turkey theoretically moved closer to the EU after 2005 by negotiating chapters on some technical issues like scientific research, it actually slipped away from European values including gender equality and freedom. According to the U.N.'s Development Programme gender empowerment index, in 2002 Turkey was ranked 63rd in the world. In 2008, it slipped to 90th place. Meanwhile, Freedom House, an independent U.S. non-governmental organization which campaigns for the spread of democracy, lowered Turkey's ranking in its annual index measuring freedom of the press from 100th in 2002 to 103rd in 2008.

The liberal camp's frustration with the AKP has been fed by the party's harsh attitude to media criticism of its performance. This disenchantment reached new levels in April 2008, when several liberals, including women who promote education for poor girls, were arrested as part of the Ergenekon case, an alleged ultra-nationalist coup plot against the government.

Liberals now seem to be abandoning the AKP, though neo-liberals continue to support it. This split stems from divergent views that liberals and neo-liberals have on Turkey's founding ideology, Kemalism. An old sage once said that liberals want to transform Kemalism because they love it, while neo-liberals want to destroy it because they hate it.

Liberals see Kemalism as a mixed bag. It has authoritarian and narodnik (for the people, despite the people) tendencies, yet it also promotes secular government, parliamentary democracy, and gender equality. Subsequently, the liberal take on Kemalism is akin to home-improvement: get rid of what cannot be fixed, improve what is outdated, cherish what is essential, and add what is needed. Liberals want to lose Kemalism's authoritarianism, improve its democratic principles, cherish its secularism, and add liberalism to it. Today, the liberals feel that the AKP, which has problems with liberal values and democratic checks and balances such as media freedom, will not liberalize Kemalism. The liberal exodus from the AKP will continue unless and until the party reverts back to its 2001-2004 ideological antecedents.

The neo-liberal take on Kemalism, on the other hand, is akin to home-demolition: destroy the old structure for it cannot be fixed, and then start a new building. The neo-liberals view certain aspects of Kemalism, such as nationalism and European style secularism (laicite), which provides freedom from religion in government and education, as incompatible with their vision of a liberal society. They want Kemalism to go away entirely. The neo-liberals will likely stick to the AKP because they see it as a useful tool with which Kemalism and its irredeemable ancient regime can be thrown away.

Lord Kinross wrote that, Kemalism used "illiberal methods towards a liberal end." An Iranian expatriate I met in Los Angeles recently said, "If modern Turkey works when stripped of Kemalism, then the neo-liberals will be proven right." She also added, "Otherwise, I am afraid, history may not be so kind in judging them."

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