

The Islamists Show Their Hand

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Articles & Testimony

When Turkey's justice and development party (AKP) first took power in 2002, it tried to reassure moderates fearful it might chip away at the country's secular, democratic and pro-Western values. The AKP renounced its Islamist heritage and began working instead to secure European Union membership and to turn Turkey into an even more liberal and pro-Western place. Almost seven years later, however, the AKP seems anything but reformist. The recent performance of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the party's leader and Turkey's prime minister, at Davos -- where he stormed off a panel with Israeli President Shimon Peres, vowing never to return -- has convinced many skeptics that the party is turning its back on the West. So have moves like saying he wants to represent Hamas on international platforms and defending Iran's nuclear weapons. The AKP now sides with Islamists and ignores their crimes. This is radically different from the Turkey of old. What happened?

To understand the AKP's turnaround, remember where it came from. The party's founders, including Erdogan, cut their teeth in an earlier, more explicitly Islamist party, which featured strong anti-Western, anti-Semitic and antisecular elements. The Welfare Party, as it was known, joined a coalition government in 1996 before alienating the secular Turkish military, the courts, and the West, leading it to be banned in 1998. Yet the party never truly disappeared, and Erdogan re-created it as the pro-American, pro-EU, capitalist and reformist AKP.

Its transformation was a cynical one, however, and no sooner had the party gained power than it began to undermine the liberal values it supposedly stood for. In 2002, for instance, it began to hire top bureaucrats from an exclusive pool of religious conservatives, and the percentage of women in executive positions in government dropped.

Efforts by secular institutions to curb the AKP only backfired. When the Constitutional Court tried to prevent it from appointing one of its own as president in 2007, the AKP cast itself as the underdog representative of Turkey's poor Muslim masses and won a monumental election victory. This hastened the party's return to its core values. The AKP began abandoning its displays of pluralism, dismissing dissent and ignoring checks and balances and condemned the media for daring to criticize it.

The failure of EU accession talks also hurt. Having made a number of painful reforms in order to improve its chances of entry, in 2005 Turkey nonetheless hit stiff opposition led by France -- at which point the AKP decided there was no point in making more painful and unpopular reforms. The nail in the coffin came that same year, when the European Court of Human Rights upheld Turkey's old ban on Islamic headscarves on college campuses. The AKP had hoped Europe might help recalibrate Turkish secularism into a more tolerant form. But this wasn't in the cards.

Soon the AKP began abandoning its pro-Western foreign policies as well. Despite Ankara's historic friendship with Washington, the United States is highly unpopular among the Turkish masses. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the AKP realized it could use this anti-Americanism to bolster its own support. And when the Gaza operation began in December, it decided to add anti-Israeli language to the mix, which culminated at Davos, where Erdogan lectured Peres for his supposed crimes before flying home to an orchestrated hero's welcome.

Such behavior has fanned the flames of anti-Semitism in traditionally tolerant Turkey. Erdogan has blamed "the

Jewish-influenced media for misrepresenting facts about Gaza," and the AKP-run government of Istanbul has erected giant billboards across the city reading, "You cannot be the children of Moses."

Seven years after the AKP came to power, Turkey's Islamists have returned to their roots. The AKP experience demonstrates that when Islamist parties moderate, it reflects not a strategic change but a tactical response to strong domestic and foreign opposition. Once these firewalls weaken, Islamist parties regress, driven by popular sentiment. A recent survey shows that the AKP's popularity jumped 10 percent after the Davos incident, suggesting the party could pass the game-changing 50 percent threshold in the upcoming March 29 local elections. The AKP's renewed Islamism may play well at the polls. But Turkey, and its allies, will be left worse off for it.

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