

Turkey's A La Carte Liberalism

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Articles & Testimony

Turkey's ruling Justice And Development Party (AKP) faces a battle for survival as the country's constitutional court reviews a case to ban the party for its allegedly antiseccular activities in violation of the Turkish Constitution. But the AKP can save itself if it can prove it is a liberal party and not an Islamist one. Alas, though many have suggested it is a liberal party in the European tradition, the evidence thus far suggests the party's liberalism comes a la carte: since it came to power in 2002, it has fused religion and political conservatism in a way that emphasizes certain liberal values while refusing to recognize others.

On economic matters, it has shown evidence of liberalism. Its pro-market policies helped the Turkish economy grow at an annual rate of more than 5 percent between 2003 and 2007. Yet this economic liberalism stops when it comes to labor rights. In May, police bludgeoned thousands of labor-union members in Istanbul during what was to be a peaceful May Day rally -- a reminder of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's warning to aggrieved union members that "where the feet rule the head, there is kiyamet [Muslim Judgment Day]."

The AKP's stance on social issues also suggests a return to traditional religious values. While it touts its proposal to allow young Muslim women to wear Islamic-style headscarves in universities as a move toward a true freedom of religion, it has clamped down on other freedoms Westerners take for granted. For instance, Turkey's drinking culture dates back to the Ottoman Empire. But alcohol consumption is banned in purist forms of Islam, and after coming to power the AKP tripled Turkey's consumption tax on wine to 3.2 liras (\$2.50) per liter, making drinking an increasingly rare and expensive luxury. Between 2006 and 2007, wine consumption dropped from 23.4 million liters to 22.8 million liters, and the AKP has taken further action against the sale of alcohol through its control of local governments, making alcoholic beverages difficult to find outside of the big cities. Between 2002 and March 2008, the number of licenses to sell alcohol in bars and restaurants dropped from 13,000 to 9,000.

Under AKP rule, Turkey has also become a less egalitarian society. In years past Turkish women served as chief justice and prime minister, and as ministers of the Interior and Foreign Affairs. Some 30 percent of Turkey's doctors and 33 percent of its lawyers are women. Yet under the AKP, women are largely excluded from decision-making positions in government and the workforce, relegated to the confines of their homes. On March 8 -- World Women's Day -- Erdogan hinted at his beliefs about women: "All women should make at least three children." While it is true that the number of women in the Turkish Parliament has increased, it is also true that in Turkey's parliamentary democracy, the government controls the legislative process. So it is distressing that there is only one woman in the AKP's cabinet -- and she is responsible for women's affairs -- and not a single woman among the 19 ministerial undersecretaries appointed by the AKP. In 1994, the percentage of women in executive positions in government was 15.1 percent, according to IRIS, an Ankara-based women's rights group. Today this ratio is at 11.8 percent.

The AKP's choice to bypass women in employment has not been without consequences. A study by the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association shows that the percentage of women in the work force dropped from 29 percent in 2000 to 22 percent last year. What's more, as a result of the AKP's economic policies, the Turkish economy created an average 1.1 percent increase in employment annually between 2003 and 2007. But women's

employment dropped by 0.8 percent, while men's employment increased by 1.8 percent, according to research conducted by the Turkish Federation of Entrepreneurs and Business World.

The AKP leadership claims it is a liberal, pro-Western party, but Turkey's European aspirations and political system would be better served if the AKP did not treat liberal, egalitarian democracy as an a la carte menu, supporting some liberties while ignoring others. Indeed, true liberalism is in the AKP's self-interest. Such a policy orientation could provide the party with a successful defense against the current case to ban it.

For its part, the West should expect from the AKP's Turkey what it expects from any liberal European democracy. A diplomat friend once said, "Turkey is in good shape, because its Islamists would be democrats in Egypt." True, but while Turkey's population is predominantly Muslim, like Egypt and other Muslim Middle Eastern countries, its political system is a secular democracy, like Europe's. Comparing Turkey politically to the Muslim yet undemocratic Egypt is as anachronistic as comparing the United States to the Christian yet undemocratic Belarus. As Turkey goes soul-searching for what it means to be a liberal, secular democracy, its political yardstick for liberalism should be Italy and France -- not Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

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