

Turkey Will Find a Balance between Secularists and Islamists

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

Nov 5, 2002

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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



Articles & Testimony

The Justice and Development Party, or AKP, a party with roots in Islamist opposition, on Sunday won 363 of the 550 seats in the Turkish parliament.

Predicting a potential failure of Turkish democracy, some analysts say the Turkish military will step in to take away this Islamist victory and preserve Turkey's status as a predominantly Muslim yet secular country.

Nothing could be less likely. Turkey is a strong democracy; a victory by a party with an Islamist pedigree will not result in a regime crisis.

And in any event, although AKP has roots in the Islamist movement, the party has stopped promoting political Islam, endorsing instead democracy and secularism. This is an encouraging development for those of us who believe that democracy and Islam are compatible.

What are the lessons that the larger Muslim world and the West can gather from the Turkish example?

AKP is an offshoot of the Islamist Welfare Party, or Refah, which took over in a confrontational coalition government in 1996. When that party launched Islamist domestic and foreign policy initiatives, it ran up against the powerful secularist bloc, which includes the media, courts, civil-society organizations, religious minorities and many Muslims who want to see a separation of mosque and state.

The secularist reaction, which forced the Islamists to finally step down from office in 1997, also taught them two valuable lessons:

The secularists will fight back hard against using democracy to attack secularism.

In a democracy, moderation is more appealing than either extremism or confrontation.

AKP is a product of these facts. Since its inception in 2001, the party has been aggressively advertising itself as a moderately conservative party that would not challenge secularism.

Additionally, unlike the previous Islamists, AKP has stayed away from challenging the nonpartisan orientation of Turkish foreign policy. The party has declared that it will follow Ankara's current line of "cautious and qualified"

support for an American campaign in Iraq.

Thus it is highly improbable that the army will intervene. Turkey in 2002 is a strong democracy, unlike in 1960 and 1980, when the army overthrew the elected governments.

In this regard, just as the Islamists have learned their lessons in democracy, so have the secularists, who know they must accommodate the majority moderate Islamists within democracy and demand that the Islamists weed out the marginal extremists.

In particular, Turkish secularists want to see AKP show its commitment to the separation of mosque and state. That means making a clean break from the Islamist elements in party leadership, especially party head Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

An independent Turkish election board decided on Sept. 20 that Erdogan, a former mayor of Istanbul who had been sentenced to a brief jail term in 1998 for inciting "religious hatred," could not run for office in November. So although Erdogan heads the party that won the most seats, he himself does not have a seat in parliament. Who will be prime minister?

AKP could insist on Erdogan and potentially polarize the political system. But that could be its demise: While the Turkish electorate shies away from confrontation, polarization would hurt AKP by scaring away the majority moderate voters.

Alternatively, AKP could draw on the lessons of democracy by replacing Erdogan with a more moderate figure, such as the party vice chair, Abdullah Gul; the parliamentary whip, Bulent Arinc; or Vecdi Gonul, the former chief justice of the Court of Accounts and a good friend of Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer. Any of these choices would underline AKP's commitment to work within the system.

By continuing to avoid injecting Islam into the political sphere, AKP might enjoy further acceptance from secular democrats. If this happens, it will have positive ramifications not only for Turkey but also for all optimists in the global debate about Islam and democracy. ❖

Los Angeles Times

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Turkey (/policy-analysis/turkey)