Political Islam in Turkey

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Turkey’s last century’s history could seem quite paradoxical for the untrained reader. Being the successor of the Ottoman Empire, which not only held an extraordinary political power in a vast region but was also personified the spiritual and political leadership of the Muslim community, the ummah, through the caliphate, it is, at least, surprising, that the republic turned out to be the only strictly secular Muslim country in the world. Secularism was introduced by the founding elite and made to the core of the state apparatus, this leading to a very strict control both in the private and the public realm of any religious expression. Specially in the first years following the foundation of the republic, any political expression of Islam was fiercely punished and persecuted. Since then nearly one century has passed by and even though the principles of the state stay untouched, Turkey has witnessed a relative relaxation of the control over religion in the public sphere through the creation -and also the closure- of several Islamic parties. The remarkable success of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP) in the 2000s and the particularity that this Islam-friendly party has become the motor of Turkey’s efforts towards an EU-accession may be enough evidence to show that in this little time, the so-called political Islam has undergone a deep transformation.

The aim of this paper is to show the development of political Islam in Turkey. In order to do so, the historical development of political Islam will be presented, paying attention not only to political dynamics within Turkey, but also to social, economical and foreign policy factors that may have affected the ideological course of this movement. The final aim is to understand the position and ideology of the AKP resulting of or interacting with this historical heritage.

The emergence of political Islam in the Ottoman Empire

The emergence of the first Islamic political movements goes back to the era of the Ottoman Empire. Its arising needs to be attributed to a form of political resistance against the westernizing
measures taken by the Sultans already in the 19th century. Westernization referred to a “program to “renew” the state and society” (Dağı 2005: 22) by adopting western, secular legislation and trying to “enlighten” the citizens in order to put religions sentiments in a corner. The impact of the West was two-fold and far-reaching: on the one hand, Western powers controlled Islamic lands politically, militarily and economically, and on the hand, the success and superiority of the West in all spheres called the “Islamic civilization” into question (Dağı 2005: 22). The considerations of Islamic intellectuals concluded that this superiority was, indeed, produced by the aloofness of the Muslims from the true belief. They did blame the West for having brought degeneration and destruction to the Islamic world, and even depicted is as the absolute evil, but still concluded that Muslims themselves were responsible for their own decadence, this leading them to a “soul-searching process” (Dağı 2005: 22) which would purify Islamic societies and thus bring the glory of the past days back.

These tensions have constituted the fundamental dichotomy between political Islam and the westernizing, secularist forces of the founders of the republic. It was indeed the radical secularization policies of the westernizers in republican Turkey which motivated the arising of an Islamic political identity, being this understood as a resistance to the westernizing policies which were abandoning the principles of Islam (Dağı 2005: 23). The ideological ground for the upcoming years of the republic was thus settled.

Politic al Islam after the foundation of the Turkish Republic

The Kemalist elite, which, as already mentioned, conducted a state-led deep political reform and turned out to be specially restrective regarding any kind of political plurality during the first years after the foundation: “any opposition, including Islamist, was outlawed and marginalized,
and thus remained almost completely underground until the late 1940s, when the transition to multiparty democracy began” (Doğan 2007: 422). The first Islamist party which could gather significant support was the Democratic Party (Demokrat Parti - DP) which was in power between 1950 and 1960 and was shut down by the military in 1961, in the first military coup of the several that would follow. Is it after this first intervention of the military that Islam’s political appeal increased considerably (Daği 2005: 24). In this regard, one name would become central to the Islamist movement: Necmettin Erbakan.

He would be the founder of the program that would lead not only a political party, but would serve as ideological ground to a succession of them and whole movement, that is: the “Milli Görüş” of the National View. Again the issues related to the West and westernization “served as a catalyst for the NVM”, which made still ambiguous references to a glorious Ottoman past and scorned cosmopolitan values in favour of nationalistic, particular ones. This ideology should be framed into the so called “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis”, a broad ideological framework that would be followed by nearly all Islamist parties until the irruption of the AKP in the political arena and that is very closely related with the historical experiences gathered during the last years of the Ottoman Empire and introduced in the previous section of this paper. The TIS combines Islamic tendencies and a Turkish nationalistic outlook, thus asserting that “Islam is the only religion in which Turkish culture found its best and the most correct expression (...) but without Turks Islam would not be strengthened and disseminated” (Şen 2010: 61). Thus it also praises the glorious Ottoman past as a combination of these two conditions. The political developments of the following decades try to illustrate how political parties attached themselves to this ideological framework.
Regarding Erbakan, he first founded the National Order Party (Milli Nizam Partisi - MNP) in 1970, which was closed the following year by the Constitutional Court because it allegedly were making use of religion to obtain political benefits. The MNP had indeed a dominant Islamist discourse and considered national and spiritual development central to their political cause. They claimed that order in the economy would be a result of state control. Another relevant pillar of MNP’s ideology was related with the fundamental cleavage between the secularist elite and the rival Islamic parties regarding their position towards the West. The MNP, as most of the Islamic parties would do in the future, clearly opposed any kind of close relation with the EEC, this implying of course any candidacy process to become a member of it (Doğan 2007: 424).

After the closure of the party, Erbakan soon reorganized his ranks in a new party, which received the name of National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi - MSP). It was a “neo-Islamist” party, “defending the retraditionalization of the social and cultural life on the basis of Islamic principles” (Doğan 2007: 424). It performed relatively well in the 1973 elections, becoming the third force in the country and entering a coalition with different leading parties until 1980. It was this year that the Justice Party (Adalet Partisi - AP) established a minority government and announced that it was planning to apply for full membership (Doğan 2007: 425). Erbakan reacted by proposing a motion of general inquiry, which succeeded thanks to the support of the CHP and Erkmens government was dismissed. 15 days later, the military intervened in a new coup and took the reins of power thus bringing the parliamentary democracy to a halt for 3 years. The rise of the TIS was particularly remarkable during this period. “The military rule attempted to reorganize society and polity around “national culture” and “Islamic values” regarded as internal and constitutive components of the national culture” (Şen 2010:
The impact was so outstanding, that “all right-wing governments since 1980 have explicitly or implicitly adopted the TIS” (Şen 2010: 64).

In 1983 new elections were held. Interestingly, all the leaders of the pre-coup parties were prohibited from engaging in politics (Doğan 2007: 425). The NVM, even in the absence of its founder, found continuity in a new party organized during the democratic break placated by the military coup: the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi - RP*). The RP gained an increasing support throughout the local and general elections of the next years, up into the 1990s, where the rise of the RP was still remarkable (Dağı 2005: 25). It was in this decade that they realized they needed to turn the party into a mass political movement, thus shifting from stressing religious issues to concentrating on social ones. It was an effort to appeal “the urban poor, who suffered from the liberalization policies of the 1980s that had had a negative impact on peripheral social and economic groups” (Dağı 2005: 25). In the meanwhile, the RP still opposed to any approach with Western forces, and even opposed the signing of the Customs Union accession in 1995, arguing that it would led to “economic destruction and loss of political independence” (Doğan 2007: 426). It was in the elections of 1995 when the RP got 21.4% of the votes and, even this share not being enough for the establishment of a majority government, went into a coalition government with the True Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi - DYP*), which had indeed signed the Customs Union Agreement one year before. This brought a slide change in the approach of the RP towards the West, since it accepted empowering relations with the EU under the condition that national sovereignty would not be sacrificed (Doğan 2007: 426). This coalition collapsed under the pressure of the Turkish military and the National Security Council, which provoked the ban RP by the Constitutional Court in 1997.
The ban on Erbakan to participate in politics for 5 years did not avoid the creation of a successor party, which, nevertheless, was quite different from its predecessor in many different aspects. The Virtue Party *(Fazilet Partisi - FP)* rejected the old days anti-westernism and even adopted a rather pro-European outlook *(Dağı 2005: 27)*. The party leaders seemed now to be concerned about the course of democratization in Turkey, and claimed that the process had important deficiencies. This probably proves that the past experiences with the rigid control of the secularist elite and the numerous closures of Islamic parties made obvious that democracy and the rule of law would bring more freedom to religious movements among others. On the other hand, the growing “class of middle-sized Anatolian businessmen (organized under the umbrella of MÜSİAD) was happy with the Customs Union as it opened up many new business opportunities for them” *(Doğan 2007: 427)*. These two developments made the party members reconsider their attitude towards the EU, thus gradually approaching a more open and supportive stance to Turkey’s EU membership. This symbolizes a dramatic change in the NVM’s history and thus in the development of political Islam in Turkey.

To sum up, at the end of this period, that is, before the rise to the power of the AKP, some major changes can be seen that would form the ground for Erdoğan’s party’s success. The first one, in relationship with the the gaining of notoriety of the MÜSİAD, was the change in industrialization strategy “from import substitution to export-oriented industrialization” *(Şen 2010: 68)*. The proliferation of Islamic businesses and a new bourgeoisie thanks to a non-interventionist policy of the various governments, “enthusiastically pursued strong neoliberal policies, promoted religious-conservative values in politics and culture” *(Şen 2010: 68)*. The culture and religion appear as a resource in economic and social organization, thus “providing a special meaning to their economic activities (...) ” *(Şen 2010: 72)*. The system is thus not just a
neoliberal market economy, but embedded in social relations and guided by religious morality. The non-interventionist policy of the governments favoured the international private investment and gave space to the flourishing of new Islamic tendencies in all spheres of life, specially in form of communities. Nevertheless, the Turkish Islamists were unable to formulate a consistent and applicable economic program. “The “Just Order” program of the Milli Görüş, notwithstanding its bold claim to solve all problems in Turkey, is full of ambiguities, inconsistencies, and conflicting ideas” (Şen 2010: 73).

**The irruption of the AKP in politics**

The Virtue Party was also closed down by the Constitutional Court, pushing the Islamist to a new reinvention of means of political expression. This had very significant consequences for the movement, since divergences that had been noticeable in the party congress of May 2000, where Abdullah Gül challenged Erbakan’s authority by presenting himself as a candidate to lead the party. With the dissolution of the FP, these discrepancies crystallized in two different parties: the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi - SP), loyal to Erbakan and traditionalist, and the Justice and Development Party (Adelet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP) led by Erdoğan and Gül and following reformist aspirations.

The AKP can be regarded as a post-Islamist movement (Dağı 2005: 30): it defines itself as “conservative democratic” and refuses the label of being an Islamist party. They give priority to the democratization process of Turkey specially in the context of an eventual accession to the EU. Their commitment to the European cause represents a major differentiating characteristic of the AKP when compared to other Islamic parties. “EU membership is regarded as a natural outcome of Turkey’s modernization” (Dağı 2005: 30) and as warranty for a political realm free
of the continuous thread of the Turkish military. Another significant ideological difference lies in the attitude of the AKP towards globalization, being this much more positive than its predecessor parties. This definitely points at a distance from the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis which had been a major leading ideology among Turkish Islamists during the last decades. As Gül was prime minister, he affirmed the following about the AKP’s ideological position:

“We are a conservative, democratic party. We want to implement EU standards; and we are pushing for EU membership. (...) Our link with religion is on an individual basis, (...) we don’t want to impose religious rules. (...) We want a truly secular system in Turkey, but we would like to see it defined in the European sense” (Gül in Yıldırım et al. 2007: 9). This reference to the European sense of secularism refers to the freedom of individuals to express their religious sentiments without complex, and is also closely related to hot topics as the headscarf ban at universities. The social importance of Islam became specially plausible as the result of the industrialization and the uncontrolled urbanization, which left the masses emigrating from rural areas in a completely new environment, “living in cities with greater expectations and fears” (Taşkın 2008: 64). This brought Islam and Islamism to a very profitable situation, being able to offer to these people some consolation and certainty and strengthening the relations based in traditional, national and moral values.

The flourishing of this Islamic consciousness and its civil society manifestations are quite remarkable. The most remarkable may be the Gülen movement, which existed previous to the AKP era, but “has been challenging those isolationist and territorial definitions of Turkishness by reemphasizing the universal nature of Islam” (Taşkın 2008: 64). The movement is far-reaching, and controls schools, media and other socially relevant institutions in order to spread its message.
One can thus assert that, through the privatization of different spheres and through keeping a secular agenda, the proliferation of Islamic civic society movements. The AKP thus keeps a quite pragmatic profile, presenting itself as capable of efficiently solving the problems of the growing middle class while strongly asserting for a Turkey’s EU full membership and adopting the criteria of the Copenhagen criteria, which spells away the mistrust of the secularist elite and avoids this way a harsh political conflict as experienced in the previous decades.

**Conclusion**

The political Islamism in Turkey has undergone a deep change in the last century. Historically organized around the West-Islamic World dichotomy, it traditionally advocated for a resurgence of Islamic values while contemplating the West and the political reforms implemented due to its influence as a sign of moral deprivation and as responsible for the decadence resulting from colonialist domination. Thus, political Islam was at the same time an anti-Western movement, aiming to purify the public realm from every Western influence.

Particularly to Turkey was the combination of nationalistic and religious elements in the ideologies of several political parties following the so called “Milli görüş”, being Erbakan one of the most relevant Islamist leaders during the last decades. Nevertheless, the secularist, Kemalist elite, specially represented by the military, was not ready to let any political party threaten the ideological fundamentals of the republic, being secularism its flagship. Until the 2000s, nevertheless, the several Islamist political parties that dared to entered the political arena -ending up closed down sooner or later- kept a quite anti-Western/anti EU position, only being the Virtue Party the one recognizing that the adoption of Western political values and a strong democracy, would be advantageous also for them.
But it was the AKP, an secession of the reformist ranks of the Virtue Party which clearly rejected the Turkish Islamic Synthesis and openly advocated for a socially conservative but politically secularist party. They became the major catalyst of political reform towards democratization and fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria, hoping to become a full member of the European Union by doing so. This strong commitment may be a sign of the honest compromise of the AKP with democracy and secularism, since the accession of Turkey to the EU would immediately exclude the possibility of establishing an Islamic state -as secularist forces fear-. Nevertheless, we shall not forget that the privatization of religion, understood as the empowerment of civil society communities aiming to spread a conservative, Islamic speech among the citizens has contributed to the arasing of several groups that are loyal to the party but do not interfere in the political realm and keep the party officially separated from any islamizing aspirations.

Also the increase of Imam-Hatip students and the increasing resources income of the Diyanet make the disappearance of any suspicion impossible.

This, together with the negative prospects on Turkey’s adhesion to the European Union, will increase the pressure on the AKP to show what kind of polity they are advocating for and let the suspicion betoken that the conflict between the Kemalist elite and the Islamist will go beyond the political arena and reach the realm of the everyday life and personal beliefs.
Bibliography:


