

# The Arab Spring and Turkey: Can a 'Turkish Model' be Proposed?

Written by Alper Y. Dede

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The world was taken by surprise when the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes fell as a result of popular uprisings on the Arab streets dubbed as the Arab Spring. According to the social scientists studying the region, social and political change in the region would take place either through gradual liberalization or gradual deterioration of the authoritarian regimes that had to deal with daunting problems like overall inefficiency of the governments to solve mundane problems of their fast growing populations, large lethargic bureaucracies, lack of rights and freedoms, and stagnant economies. In other words, until the Arab Spring, for many analysts, the region was immune to democratization, and in that regard the exceptionalism of the region in terms of democratization had become one of the most debated issues in the literature on Middle Eastern politics.

Contrary to the widely accepted belief that the authoritarian regimes in the region were well entrenched, the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes fell shortly after the mass protests on the streets took place. Similar protests also took place in Libya and Syria. After a somewhat lengthy conflict between the insurgent forces and the Qaddafi regime, and the European-NATO involvement with the crisis in Libya, Qaddafi was captured, and lynched to death. In fact, Qaddafi's death marks the beginning of a new era in Libyan politics. Currently, among some other authoritarian countries of the region, Syria is the regime that still stands against the revolutionary wave of the Arab Spring.

Each country has its own unique experience in terms of how the course of events has eventually led to the fall of authoritarian regimes in the region. Moreover, among the country-specific reasons that determined the course of events during the Arab Spring, we can talk about two different attitudes in regards to the role that the militaries played during the uprisings: siding with the people and siding with the regime. Tunisia and Egypt belong to the earlier category, whereas Libya and Syria belong to the latter. In Tunisia and Egypt, the militaries actually advised the authoritarian rulers to step down, which did not take place in Libya and Syria, where the events have escalated. Qaddafi resisted until he was lynched to death, however Bashar Asad still remains in power. It is not very easy to predict how the Arab Spring will affect events in Syria, and how long the Asad regime will remain in power.

While the Arab Spring has been in full swing, the question of whether Turkey, a significant player of Middle Eastern politics, could become a role model for the rest of the region comes to mind. Can Turkey really become an example for the rest of the region? Is there actually a Turkish model? Indeed, there are legitimate reasons for us to ask these questions: Turkey has made significant strides in regards to improving her democracy, expanding her economy steadily over the years and becoming the fastest growing country after China, establishing warmer relations with the rest of the region and almost becoming a "soft power."

In addition to the brief reasons provided above, the most important aspect of Turkey's potential to become a model for the rest of the region is her ability to uphold secularism while trying to become more democratic despite the fact that there is currently a conservative government ruling Turkey (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP, The Justice and Development Party) with its origins in Turkey's Islamist tradition (*Milli Görüş Hareketi*, The National Outlook Movement) established by Necmeddin Erbakan about four decades earlier. Turkey's secularization experience since the establishment of the Turkish Republic has been quite complicated. When the new Turkish Republic was first established on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, which collapsed at the end of the First World War, the secularist

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elites of the early republican period of the new state adopted a harsh version of secularism that resembled French *laicism*, not the Anglo-Saxon version of it. K. Ataturk of Turkey did not hesitate to take harsh measures as part of his ambitious reform program to break the power of the *ulema* (clergy) class from the Ottoman times, and to limit the role of religion in social and political lives of Turkish citizens. For instance, religious education was banned, all religious endowments, including their revenues and properties, were nationalized, religious orders were banned and their worshipping places were closed down. Later, upon popular demands, religious education was allowed only under state supervision and all mosques were put under government control, which is still in effect. Turkish civilian and military bureaucracy assumed the role of protecting Turkish secularism during the single party era (1923-1950).

This secularism-from-above lasted only about two decades. When Turkey shifted from the single party to the multi-party era, the Democratic Party won in a landslide, partially because they promised to soften the harsh policies of the secularism-from-above mentality. However, despite the changes in the party structure of Turkey, remnants of the earlier harsh secularist measures are still in place.

Relatively speaking, Turkey today has a healthier relationship with secularism than before. However, problems still remain. For instance, the government still controls all mosques, i.e., prayer leaders are government employees and mosques' expenditures are still subsidized by the government. Religious education is still under strict government control. However, the strict secularism-from-above mentality has changed considerably over the years. Thus, Turkey can become a model for the rest of the region as the Arab world has been experiencing mass movements and political change through uprisings on the Arab streets. Based on the lessons learned from how Turkey has managed to uphold democratic principles, despite some problems, and has been able to separate religion and politics from each other over the years. Considering the strong demands over the years by religious groups in the Arab world for an Islamic government, this could be the *first* pillar of the Turkish model.

The *second* pillar of the model, with the recent constitutional changes, would be keeping the military away from politics. Turkey has had three direct (1960, 1971 and 1980) and two indirect (1996 and 2007) military interventions. Due to the role that the militaries have played in the Tunisian and Egyptian transitions, we might expect the militaries of these two countries to play an important role during and after the transitions to a more democratic regime because unlike the Libyan and Syrian militaries, the Tunisian and Egyptian militaries did not side with the authoritarian leaders and opted for change. In other words, unlike the Libyan and Syrian militaries that chose to side with their authoritarian leaders and used brutal measures to suppress the riots on the streets, the Tunisian and the Egyptian militaries were not discredited. The literature on democratic transitions suggests that we might expect the militaries, that did not side with the authoritarian leaders during the transition, to have a larger say in the new democratic period. However, this includes the risk of having too much military influence on the process that would be initiated after the fall of the authoritarian regimes. In that regard, the lessons taken from the Turkish experience could be useful for the Arab world as Turkey recovered from three (plus two) military interventions that resulted in brief periods of military rule.

The *third* pillar of the model would be Turkey's ability to achieve rapid and steady economic growth while the whole world has been struggling with a global economic crisis. The lessons from the Turkish case can be applied to the rest of the region. When the new Turkish Republic was established in 1923, K. Ataturk first wanted to experiment with free market models. However, due to a complex set of reasons, Turkey was initially unable to implement a market based economy and ended up adopting statist policies where the government had a heavy role in the economic sector. Combined with the large and mostly lethargic public bureaucracy and the governments' inability to deal with economic issues, the Turkish economy has remained sluggish over the years. In the late 1980s it was Turgut Özal's liberalization reforms, including a bold privatization package, which shattered the statist policies of the earlier periods. The AKP government then had the opportunity to base their liberal economic policies on the achievements earlier accomplished by Turgut Özal. In other words, the roots of the AKP's economic successes can be traced back to Özal's liberalization programs initiated earlier. Additionally, the AKP's electoral base comes from the conservative entrepreneurs, who mostly come from central Anatolian towns, whose growth emerged through the opportunity spaces created following the liberalization policies of the Özal period. In short, the Arab world can benefit from the valuable lessons taken from the Turkish case as the region still has statist economies.

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The applicability of the *three pillars* of the Turkish model is another question that needs to be discussed. Each path to democratization is unique and in this regard the democratization processes resembles one person's life experiences. One person's life experiences cannot be exactly same as another person's life experiences, and so is each country's democratization experience. However, parallels can be drawn and lessons can be taken. Thus, despite the fact that Turkey's lessons are her own and unique, there is no need to deny the fact that the Arab world can benefit from Turkey's experiences as the Arab Spring initiated the process of change in the region.

*Dr. Alper Y. Dede is a professor of International Relations at Zirve University, Gaziantep, Turkey. His area of expertise lies in political Islam in the Middle East especially focusing on Turkey and Egypt. For a more extensive treatment of the topic see his article in the spring 2011 edition of Insight Turkey: The Arab Uprisings: Debating the "Turkish Model".*