

Erdogan's Difficulties Understanding the New Opposition

Written by Ilter Turan

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ILTER TURAN, JUL 27 2013

Cultural Bifurcation: A Cleavage Entrenched in History

The recent developments in Egypt illustrate the “problem of culturally bifurcated societies”[1] that plagues much of the Middle East. On one side of bifurcation are the modern, westernized segments of society. Their size and the depth of their transformation in any society depend on the length and the scope of the modernization process (i.e. how comprehensive and penetrating modernization policies have been) and the level of economic development. On the other side are the more traditional segments of society that are not necessarily “unmodern” in that they are a part of the economic processes of society, they send their children to modern schools etc. But they are not acculturated to a set of western values which, among others, make religion a matter of personal concern rather than one of community confession expecting all members of the community to conform to religious ritual, holding men and women to be equal, and do not subscribe to the idea that women should dress conservatively.

Turkey is also a culturally bifurcated society, but its intensity is much less compared to other societies with mainly Muslim populations for several reasons. To begin with, Turkey’s history of modernization predates other states because of its more intense cultural interaction with Europe. Furthermore, Western influences were more readily felt and more profuse owing to the presence of sizable non-Muslim minorities in the Empire. Second, unlike colonies, Turkey’s cultural transformation was not imposed from the outside but a result of state led modernization to avert continual defeat in the hands of Western powers. Since modernization policies were not external impositions, unpopular as some of the measures were, they did not generate the hatred associated with colonial policies. For similar reasons, the “modern” and “unmodern” were not segregated as in colonial societies and interacted more freely. Third, the Turkish Republic that succeeded the Ottoman Empire implemented a policy of intense cultural transformation and laicization. Laws, including the civil law, were replaced by European inspired laws while the content of education was deeply secularized. These policies rendered Turkey’s modern segment significantly larger than in other neighboring countries. Fourth, Turkey’s economic development first under policies of import substitution and later export oriented growth contributed significantly to the expansion of Turkey’s mainly modern middle class.

A fifth factor has been critical, however, in softening the cultural polarization in Turkey. Turkey made a peaceful transition to competitive politics during the 1946-1950. The necessity to also get the votes of the “unmodern” segments of society to win the elections, provided the opportunity to incorporate them into the social and political life of the country. While democratization did not fully undermine the domination of the political and social life by the “modern”, it constituted a way through which the “unmodern” became included in political game, gradually increasing their influence.

There were two major constraints to the exercise of power by elected politicians however. The first was the powerful bureaucratic elite of which the military constituted the strongest component. Over time, much of the bureaucracy yielded to electoral supremacy, but the military continued to wield enough power such that it could veto actions of government that it judged to undermine the principles of Ataturk’s revolution and its institutional interests. Twice, in 1960 and 1980, the military took over the reins of government directly. On other occasions such as in 1971 and 1997, it forced changes of government or policy or both. After the 1960 intervention, a National Security Council

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bringing the military leadership with the government was established, allowing commanders to communicate their preferences to civilian leaders, and to make sure that they were observed.

The other constraint were the constitutions that the military had prepared in 1961 and then in 1982. Produced and ratified under military rule, both documents were generous in extending prerogatives to the military in defining the limits within which elected governments could operate. In addition to the National Security Council mentioned above, another critical institution in the system were the courts, led by the Constitutional Court, which closed down several times the antecedents of the currently governing religiously conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) for having used religion for political ends. In 1998, a lower court sentenced the then metropolitan mayor Erdogan to prison for having incited religious hatred through citing a poem. He was removed from his post. Much later in 2007 under AKP rule, the Constitutional Court issued a highly questionable ruling on what constituted a quorum in the parliament for electing a president in order to prevent Mr. Abdullah Gul of the AKP from being elected president. The attempt eventually failed only after a new election gave the AKP 52 percent of the vote and an overwhelming electoral victory.

The Prime Minister and the Opposition

The AKP marked the first occasion that a religiously conservative party had achieved power alone; although after 1973, parties of its lineage had participated in coalitions. In the 2002 elections, the AKP, a few months after its founding, won an impressive parliamentary majority. It chose, however, to pursue a conciliatory line toward the opposition, aware of the deep concerns that the urban middle and upper classes that the AKP would strive to impose religion on society. It opted for a similar approach after the elections of 2007 which handed the AKP another electoral victory. There were occasional debates where the opposition charged that on some social and educational measures the country was moving away from secularism, but they were not unlike debates on similar questions in other democratic societies.

The inclusionary stance of the Erdogan government changed substantially after the AKP's third electoral victory in 2011. Now, in three successive elections, the AKP had increased its popular vote. The opposition was in disarray with little chance of electoral improvement in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, months before the elections, the courts had initiated proceedings against the top retired commanders of the Turkish Armed Forces for having plotted a coup. This process soon came to include many active duty generals, admirals and others of lower rank. The process involved considerable negligence of the basics of a due process such as ignoring the rules of admissible evidence and keeping persons under custody without a clear indictment for long periods. However, tackling the military's political power was viewed with favor domestically and internationally, since it removed the possibility future coups and helped bring the military under civilian control.

With little to be concerned about, the Prime Minister (whose personal charisma and power makes his cabinet appear as a support team rather than as members of a collegial body) began to employ a rhetoric and initiate policies that opposition parties and urban segments of the public in particular, found as moving Turkey away from its western oriented secular and democratic path. On the secularist front, the government brought changes to the educational system, increasing the amount of religious education in primary and secondary schools; it enhanced the role of preacher training schools in the system and guided more students to them; expanded the budgetary allocations and activities of the Directorate of Religious Affairs including the size of its work force, and ignored the pleas of minority sects to have their own houses of prayer rather than having to pray at mosques. The government kept introducing additional measures to reduce the consumption of alcohol while the Prime Minister volunteered that anyone who imbibed was an alcoholic. He insisted that every married couple should have no less than three children. He complained that major segments of society, especially youth, were failing in morals because "we had failed to teach them our moral traditions,"[2] a deficiency the government would soon act to eradicate.

On the democratic front, any objection to his policies has been countered with the allegation that he had been given a mandate by the voters. The opponents have been accused of being a part of an international conspiracy to undermine the government. Under a set of laws presumably designed to combat terrorism, Turkey has achieved the dubious distinction of having the largest number of journalists in prison in the world. Businesses that own

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newspapers and TV stations are approached to tame their reporters, columnists or anchors who may render critical remarks about the government's policies or AKP personalities, notably the Prime Minister. Many who have crossed the line have lost their jobs. Attempts by university students to demonstrate have been quelled by clubs and tear gas. University administrators, all appointed by the current administration, have then tried to implement disciplinary action against the activist students. The Prime Minister, in his speeches, has belittled the opposition. The exception has been the Kurdish ethnic movement, comprising a terrorist organization, the PKK, as well as a parliamentary party, the Freedom and Democracy Party (BDP). The government seems to have decided that it would like to try to terminate Turkey's "Kurdish problem" through peaceful methods rather than the anti-insurgency measures that have been employed earlier.

The government has assumed that the relatively stable and prosperous conditions of the Turkish economy generated sufficient satisfaction among the voter as such that it would be possible to change the constitution in favor of a presidential system to which the prime minister would be elected. It also assumed that objections based on environmental and urban planning concerns raised by citizens could be ignored. It dismissed allegations of moving the system in a religious direction and committing many violations of democratic rule. Such reticence was confounded by the personal authoritarianism (probably both core and learned) of the Prime Minister and his belief that he could do no wrong.

An Opposition that the Prime Minister Fails to Understand

When young people occupied a park where the Prime Minister insisted that a shopping mall be built under the pretense of rebuilding military barracks that had existed on the site almost a century ago, the government assumed that this was another typical opposition move that could be dealt with by using clubs, water cannons and tear gas. In contrast to earlier experience where such tactics would lead the demonstration to fizzle out, however, the crowds grew larger and began to include more and more people who do not usually take part in such manifestations. They did not represent a party preference but included people who had voted for the government in the past, some anti-capitalist Islamists, students, young professionals and even retired people. Many wanted the government to be more observant of the rules of democratic governance, not to meddle into domains that they considered to be private, pay attention to environmental concerns and rules of healthy urban planning, and more generally, be treated with respect by the Prime Minister. Most did not ask the government to resign but to reconsider its policies.

Ironically, the demonstrators represented a social class that had grown in size and risen in importance during a decade of sustained economic growth under the rule of the AKP. The Prime Minister, however, continued to conceptualize opposition as well as the relations between government and opposition in terms of an earlier era. He has failed. He is at a quandary. He tries to discredit the opposition by making allegations that some religious people were treated disrespectfully by the demonstrators, and that some drank beer and made out in a mosque where they had taken refuge. The public has not found such allegations credible; he has mobilized pro-government mass demonstrations; in brief, he has tried to polarize the public but to no avail. He has lost his ability to shape the agenda. A barrage of humor has permeated the electronic media. People are less restrained than before expressing criticism of the Prime Minister.

It seems that Mr. Erdogan has difficulty in understanding the new opposition, and it is not clear that he has a particularly profound understanding of liberal democracy. Whether he can change is a matter of conjecture or possibly well wishing.

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[1] While it may have been used elsewhere earlier, I was introduced to the expression by Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1958) p. 130 and passim.

[2] The remarks were uttered originally in a speech the Prime minister rendered to the party group, i.e. the AKP parliamentary party on July 2, 2013. Cf. He has since repeated the argument in a variety of his speeches.

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