

# “After the Spring”: Is Turkey a Model for Arab States?

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The countries of the so-called Arab spring now have to move from popular protest to lasting institution-building. In this context, a multiplicity of voices has been advocating Turkey as a model for the democratic and economic development of Arab states. This essay critically examines the Turkish model and emphasizes its particularities that strongly differentiate Turkey from its southern neighborhood.

Spring is over and the difficult process of building new institutions has begun. This applies at least to Tunisia and Egypt, whereas Libya never experienced a spring but a bloody civil war whose aftermath still is uncertain. In Tunisia, the Islamist Ennahda party achieved impressive 41 percent of the votes in the first free elections, and its leader, Rachid Ghannouchi, promised to take his example not in fundamentalist ideologies of an Islamic state but rather in the way in which the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has governed Turkey in the past decade. Already upon his return from London to Tunis, Ghannouchi told his followers and the world press that Turkey is his model. In this way, he shared the cacophony of voices that has been advocating Turkey as a model for the reformation of crumpling authoritarian Arab states. This essay will critically examine the Turkish experience and cast some doubt over the all-too easy suggestion that Arab states should follow the "Turkish model".

In September 2011, the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was touring Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, making himself the most pronounced advocate of the Turkish model. Thereby, his promotion of a combination of democracy, secular statehood, liberal market economy and Islamic values represented pretty much the self-image of the incumbent AKP government in Turkey. The unrest in the Arab world has given Erdoğan an opportunity to jump on the bandwagon of Arab popular movements in order to enhance his legitimacy at home, to support the AKP's struggle against Turkey's Kemalist establishment and to present the country as a rising regional power against the backdrop of the stalemate in the EU accession negotiations between Ankara and Brussels. Moreover, an active Turkish foreign policy in the region is meanwhile a must due to the increasing importance of Arab states as export markets for Turkish products and construction industries.

At the same time, the performance of the AKP government has become a central reference point for the ongoing debate about the compatibility of Islam and democracy that has occupied western audiences in the past years. In rejecting the Islamist label and branding itself as a Muslim conservative party, the AKP seized the opportunity which post 9/11 international politics has offered. The party combined a limited Islamization of Turkish society with the democratization of its political and the liberalization of its economic institutions. In light of the political importance of Islamist movements in the Arab world, many western politicians, academics and media pundits have been happily taking up the AKP's self-image in order to propagate the compatibility of Islam and democracy and to counter the threat of anti-western Islamist rule in the region which has been the political nightmare scenario for the West in the past decades.

Finally, Islamist movements in the region themselves increasingly refer to the AKP as a model in their strategies to seize political power. In light of the predominantly non-religious character of the popular unrest in the Arab world, many Islamist parties have fully appropriated the global discourse on democra-

cy, integrating popular demands for accountability and rule of law into their Islamist worldviews. In adopting the Turkish model, these parties do not only try to appeal to the democratically minded non-religious constituencies at home; they also indicate international actors that they are willing to play politics according to contemporary rules of the game.

By closer inspection, the Turkish model which this heterogeneous group is advocating with respect to the transformation of the Arab world is in fact an AKP model, predicated on the assumption that the task is first and foremost to open an avenue for Islamist movements toward democracy and political pluralism. Thereby, these advocates of the AKP model overestimate the role the AKP has played in the transformation of Turkish politics and society. To be sure, in particular between 2002 and 2005 the AKP government has conducted dramatic reforms of Turkey's legal structures and public institutions, as well as implemented a turn in the means and directions of foreign policy that addressed Turkey's Middle Eastern neighborhood in a more active and independent way without deviating from Ankara's traditional path of integration with the West. However, it would be wrong to give the credit for Turkey's transformation to the AKP alone. Most of the reform trajectories have not been initiated by the party; the AKP only accelerated and intensified a transformation which already has been under way. In terms of economic liberalization, for instance, the AKP enhanced and developed further the direction already taken by the previous Prime Minister (1983-89) and President (1989-93) Turgut Özal. Changes in Turkey's foreign policy formulation already occurred under Foreign Minister İsmail Cem (1997-2002) who combined Turkey's EU membership request with an opening to the country's neighborhood on the Balkans, the Black Sea region, the Caucasus and the Middle East. There is no doubt that remarkable figures of economic growth under AKP rule have pushed Turkey into the G 20 group. However, a major structural background for Turkey's economic success can be found in its relationship to the EU. Turkey's exports to the EU comprise about 45 percent, while Middle Eastern states figure – even after a dramatic increase of their share – with still only 20 percent of Turkey's total exports. Even more important, with more than 75 percent, the overwhelming source for Foreign Direct Investment in Turkey remains to be the EU. Last but not least, the economic politics of the AKP benefited a lot from the customs union between Turkey and the EU which was concluded in 1995 and resulted in a thorough transformation of the legal economic structures of the country.

The promotion of Turkey as a model for Arab states must put the AKP into Turkish political context. The political success story of the AKP is due to three crucial developments that are inseparably linked to the path-dependent structural transformation of Turkey mentioned in the paragraph above. Firstly, in its ideological outlook the party followed the line of its predecessor, the Virtue Party (Fazilet), in adopting the globally dominant discourse on democracy and human rights. Secondly, in mobilizing broad political support for democratic legitimacy among the Turkish electorate, it has made references to Islamic

norms and values, while abandoning the Islamist rhetoric of the National Outlook movement under the grand old man of Turkey's nationalist religious political wing Necmetin Erbakan. Finally, the AKP has built up a support base among liberal groups in Turkish society for achieving the necessary popular recognition as a legitimate political actor within Turkey's multi-party system. Given the increasingly authoritarian and intolerant behavior of Prime Minister Erdoğan at home, the successful confluence of these developments might reach an end if the liberal constituencies in Turkish politics and economics move away from supporting the AKP. With respect to Erdoğan's promotion of democracy and liberalism in the Arab world, critical voices in Turkey reminded the Prime Minister first to fully live up to liberal democratic standards at home before promoting democracy abroad.

In conclusion, both the transformation of Turkey's Islamists to Muslim conservatives and the political and economic reforms the country has experienced in the past decade have been utterly path-dependent. When the AKP took power in 2002, the major trajectories were already set. Moreover, at that point the country and its people have experienced more than 50 years of electoral democracy and frequent shifts of governments through the ballot box. Of course, for decades Turkish democracy has suffered under the tutelage of the Kemalist state's military and juridical institutions. However, the political and economic structures of Turkey have developed in fundamentally different ways from those in most Arab states. Moreover, at the turn of the century, Turkish society was not anymore willing to accept the Kemalist system of limited democracy. As much as the AKP has contributed to the recent transformation of Turkey, the party is also a product of the path-dependent institutional setting of the Turkish republic and decades of West-integration that have characterized the political history of the country. This does not exclude to take Turkey as a major point of reference in the transformation of authoritarian Arab states; elements of the Turkish experience might certainly help Arab actors to find their own ways to build democratic and economically prosperous societies. The AKP, however, is a very particular phenomenon and not a role model for political development or the transformation of Islamist movements. Moreover, after the AKP's overwhelming electoral success and its currently almost un-contested power position in Turkish politics, the party itself has first to stay the test of time and prove that its image of Muslim democrats is true.