CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Politics and Religion in Turkey

As a Muslim-majority country that is also a secular democratic state, a member of NATO, and a long-standing U.S. ally, Turkey is pivotal to U.S. strategy for shaping the Middle Eastern security environment. However, Turkey has not been immune to the changes that have transformed the religiopolitical landscape of the Muslim world in recent decades, which include an increase of religiosity and an upsurge in the political expression of Islam. These trends were generated by a variety of factors, including the emergence of a religious entrepreneurial sector and of a dominant political party with Islamic roots, a more open debate about Kemalism and its relevance to contemporary Turkish society, and a political crisis over the selection of a new president in the spring and summer of 2007.

Contemporary Turkey is a key test case for the role of Islam in politics and its influence on external policy. It is also a distinctive, possibly unique, case in several respects. The Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP)), led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, rules as a solid majority government, having trounced all rivals in Turkey’s November 2002 elections and further reinforced its position with strong results in 2004 local elections. The AKP won an impressive 46.6 percent of the vote in the July 2007 election—increasing its electoral vote by 12 percent over its performance in 2002—although because of the mathematics of the distribution of seats in parliament,
the number of seats held by the AKP decreased from 362 to 340, short of the two-thirds needed to amend the constitution.¹

Even before the AKP’s victory in the 2002 general elections, there was a substantial religious component in Turkish politics. The dominant center-right parties of the 1980s and early 1990s, the True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi (DYP)) and the Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi (ANAP)), always contained significant socially conservative wings. Necmettin Erbakan founded a series of Islamist parties over the past 30 years and was very influential as deputy prime minister in the 1970s and briefly as prime minister in the 1990s. Before the advent of multiparty democracy in the 1950s, Islamism had no expression in the political system, which was the exclusive domain of the official Kemalist party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP).

Despite its Islamist roots, the AKP government has not pursued an overt Islamist agenda (although critics accuse it of seeking to infiltrate Islamists into the civil bureaucracy and condoning Islamization at the local level). The Erdoğan government has given priority to pursuing Turkey’s EU membership, economic stabilization, and reform of the legal system. These reforms have included the abolition of the death penalty, “civilianization” of the National Security Council, broadcasting in Kurdish by the state-owned Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT), and ratification of international human rights conventions.² The Erdoğan government has been less aggressive than many had hoped it would be in reforming or scrapping the controversial Article 301 of the Turkish constitution, which criminalizes insults to “Turkishness.” Opposition from nationalists and Kemalists, as well as the presence of conservative nationalists within its own ranks, along with the rising mood of nationalism, leave the AKP little room for maneuver in this area.

¹ The Turkish electoral system sets a 10 percent threshold for a political party’s representation in parliament; in 2002, only one other party, the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP), passed the threshold, disproportionately increasing the number of AKP seats. In 2007, a third party, the Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP), also passed the threshold, bringing about an overall reduction in the number of seats held by the AKP and the CHP.

Yet there continues to be an active debate over the real nature of the AKP’s agenda and close scrutiny of its credentials as a self-proclaimed “conservative democratic party.” Erdoğan professes to lead a movement of “Muslim Democrats”—rather like Christian Democrats in Western Europe—in which religion is a cultural backdrop rather than an active part of the political agenda. Opinions are divided on whether this approach represents a genuine expression of a new synthesis in Turkish politics or a tactic to hold Turkey’s entrenched secularists, including the military (and constitutional strictures against religious politics), at bay.

Elements within the AKP, and in the religious parties to the right of it, would surely like to press a more Islamic social agenda. Pragmatists within the party, including Erdoğan and President Abdullah Gül, recognize the risks of doing so. Against this background, the selection of Gül as president and possible constitutional changes proposed by the AKP will be key tests of the secular-religious balance in the country.

Turkey’s “recessed” Islamic politics—with religion as an implicit rather than an explicit part of political discourse—is one source of Turkish distinctiveness. This is a function of Turkey’s form of secularism: based on the French model of laïcité, but with state-religion relations rooted in the Ottoman tradition that subordinates religion to state authority. Turkey’s constitution places firm limits on expressions of political Islam. Religious associations—Sufi orders, for instance—cannot operate legally.

To be sure, Turkish secularism in the Kemalist mold is evolving under the pressure of a more cosmopolitan intellectual debate. The private practice of religion is more widely accepted today, even within secular circles. Secularists certainly want to limit the role of religion in Turkish politics, but the automatic association of religiosity with a backward, Middle Eastern outlook is now less common. The common denominator of Turkish secularists is, above all, a desire to prevent the erosion of their highly Westernized way of life. Much of the sec-

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ular urban middle class views the implications of Islamist influence through a “lifestyle” lens. Concerns about political Islam per se or a strategic drift to the “East” are more prevalent among intellectuals, business elites, and the secular political class.

Another source of Turkey’s distinctiveness is history, what the distinguished Turkish scholar Şerif Mardin calls “Turkish exceptionalism.”4 The Ottoman Empire was the seat of the caliphate and thus the center of Muslim political power and presence in international relations into the early years of the 20th century. Atatürk’s secular revolution modernized and Westernized Turkey in key respects. But even after 85 years, the results of this experiment are contested. Turkey remains a place of sharp regional, class, and cultural differences, and these unresolved tensions are part of the contemporary Turkish political landscape. The AKP’s success can be explained in large measure by the way in which the movement has captured a sense of Turkish popular dissatisfaction with established political elites. A key question is whether the AKP will maintain its present course, or whether the crumbling of institutional restraints or pressures from more-radical elements will lead it to embrace a more overtly religious agenda.

A key factor shaping Turkey’s evolution is the EU accession process, even if many in Europe are trying to keep Turkey at arms’ length. The EU project represents a convergence of the AKP’s international and domestic strategic goals. The AKP discovered human rights and democracy as a means of protecting itself from authoritarian Kemalists. It realized the advantages of speaking the language of democracy—which enables the party to communicate with the West and to reassure those who suspect that it may secretly harbor an Islamist agenda. Erdoğan has spoken about “marketing Turkey” and has defended the idea of globalization. The West, in turn, has emerged as an ally of the AKP.5

5 Dağı, op. cit.