

# Insights for Egypt's and Tunisia's Islamists from Turkish Experience of Democratic Transition

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**ABSTRACT** *Turkey is achieved a viable combination of Islam, democracy and development. After prolonged periods of political instability and interruptions in democratic rule, the Islamic-leaning AK Party government overcame the hurdles preventing it from reaching power in the early 2000s. It achieved a significant degree of democratization and economic growth without oil or foreign aid and repeatedly won elections ever since. As such, the party's success offers important lessons for Islamists in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco. The lessons of the Turkish experience are especially relevant in dealing with the opposition and democratization, as well as achieving stability and growth.*

**T**wo years after the fall of dictators in Egypt and Tunisia, both countries are struggling with political instability and socio-economic problems. Egypt's experience with democracy ended with a violent coup d'état, while Tunisia is still struggling with the destabilizing effects of political assassinations and polarization. Since the toppling of the regimes, the revolutionary forces have become divided among themselves by entering a fierce ideological struggle. The two countries could not economically recover because the global economic crisis is still taking its toll and these nations remain politically unstable. Are there any lessons from Turkey's democratic transition for

Egypt and Tunisia? I will elaborate on the current situations in Egypt and Tunisia by drawing similarities from the Turkish case.

There is a major difference between AK Party's rise to power in Turkey and the electoral victories of Islamists in Tunisia and Egypt. The former came to power through a gradual democratic process with a long history of hard-fought successes and failures, while the Egyptian and Tunisian counterparts came to power through a popular uprising after a long period of suppression. In the two Arab countries, the Islamists did not instigate revolts but their participation was instrumental in toppling

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the dictators later on. Based on their grassroots organizations and efforts, they gained the plurality of popular votes in extraordinary conditions following the fall of the regime. In Tunisia, the revolutionary dynamic somewhat continued as the Revolutionary Council took over the transitional period. However, in Egypt the High Military Council controlled the transition and managed to shift the reform dynamic by convincing the Islamist parties to accept a partial constitutional amendment, rather than drafting a new constitution based on a revolutionary spirit. In the end, the military institution managed to remove the Morsi government and once again took power in Egypt.

Similar reasons brought the AK Party, al-Nahda and the Justice and Development Party to power: poverty, oppression of basic rights, lack of freedom, high inflation and corruption. Before the arrival of the AK Party, Turkey experienced what we can call a “malfunctioning democracy,” which could not bring political stability and economic welfare. The Turkish military intervened in the political process several times directly and indirectly in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997, limiting the civilian role in

the political process. The interference of the military occurred because the secular established elites did not fully trust the majority Muslim public and kept a limited space for democracy. Each time the military returned to its barracks by maintaining a privileged position in the system. The Turkish establishment enabled the bureaucracy to supervise civilian action in the social sphere and politics.

With limited political leverage, civilian leaders of Turkey fell short in achieving serious social and economic development due to political and economic instability. This instability resulted partly from the resistance of established elites (e.g. bureaucracy, bourgeoisie and intellectuals) to transfer power to elected officials. In the 1970s and 1990s, Turkey was in a state of political turmoil filled with violent clashes and political assassinations, which in turn resulted in military intervention in politics. Both Tunisia and Egypt are going through a similar political turmoil today with ideologically motivated conflicts and assassinations. The Tunisian problem of destabilization is closer to Turkey in the 1990s, where political assassinations were main reason for instability. Despite its relative success compared to Egypt, Tunisia's Islamists managed the crisis better than Egypt, as al-Nahda came to realize the necessity of power-sharing.

### Conservative Politics in Turkey

When Necmettin Erbakan's Islamic Welfare Party came to power in 1996

in a coalition government, the party could not relieve the fears of Kemalist secular groups that believed religion was a barrier for development, despite its government's relatively successful economic program. In addition to the doctrinal challenge, Kemalist elites saw Erbakan's possible success as a threat to the dominant discourse (i.e. legitimacy) of the secularist military, bourgeoisie and intellectuals. Erbakan often used rigid and allegorical political discourse, causing concern and resistance from secular groups. The exaggerated fear of the Islamist Welfare Party helped unite secular groups that were previously divided. Unrelenting discourse and attitude united the opposition in Turkey, eventually resulting in the overthrow of the government.

The AK Party's approach was different from that of Erbakan's Welfare Party. The AK Party adopted a discourse of democracy, freedom and human rights within the practical constraints of the secular and democratic regime. Erdoğan defended religious freedoms within a human rights framework by focusing on universal rights and individual freedoms. As the Constitution prescribed the freedom of religion and secularism, the AK Party was able to silence some of the secularist fears. Furthermore, it allowed the party to approach wider sections of society, win elections and extend its popular base. The AK Party is still ahead of the opposition in defending human rights today, including cultural rights for the Kurdish population. Instead of rejecting secularism categorically, Erdoğan practically revised

its meaning. It was transformed from the strict official version into a notion that guarantees religious rights and freedoms, while maintaining the continuation of the secular lifestyle. This middle way reduced tension and resistance from secular elites, while increasing its appreciation among conservative groups.

During his rule, Erbakan focused on improving the economy but political instability and a united opposition led to his demise. Erdoğan, however, concentrated on the economy first by staying away from the ideological strife that hurt the Welfare Party. This provided the AK Party with legitimacy and bolstered political stability in the country. Furthermore, Erbakan condemned criticism as a Western, Israeli or elite conspiracy, rejecting them categorically. Popular protests that began against the deep state and political assassinations slowly turned against the government because Erbakan neglected the call to bring the offenders to justice. In the end, the Erbakan's Refah-Yol Government collapsed due to increasing tension and instability in the country. This process became known as a 'post-modern coup' or soft coup. That is, the military managed to remove Erbakan's party from power without using arms. The ensuing process meant the suppression of Islamic movements and economic crisis due to corruption and bad governance.

Similar to Erbakan, the Morsi government of Egypt did not pay enough attention to the coalition that was slowly gaining strength and turning against



Tunisians rally to show their support for the ousted Egyptian president Morsi.

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it. When protests and political tensions led to his resignation from the government, Erdogan claimed there were not any problems in the country. He did not lead his supporters to the streets. Similarly, the Muslim Brotherhood did not pay attention to the protests gathering in Tahrir square in order to strip the legitimacy of the claim that all Egyptians supported the removal of President Morsi. The Brotherhood started to mobilize its supporters after the removal of Morsi by the military but it was too late. Unlike the Brotherhood, Erdogan restrained from organizing mass protests due in part to the possibility of provocation, but mostly because the 1998 Turkish coup is considered a soft coup or a 'post-modern' coup.

Erdogan's rise came as a result of popular grievances due to both the oppression of religious and ethnic

rights and the economic crisis of 2001, caused by the failures of the pro-coup parties. Erdogan's AK Party promised a greater prosperity along with democracy and freedom in the face of social, political and economic problems. In the beginning, Erdogan mostly focused on improving services such as transportation, health care and education, as well as attracting investment by improving security with police reforms. He gradually improved human rights and religious freedoms, benefitting from the European Union's demands to improve human rights and reduce military patronage.

Rather than focusing on ideological issues, the AK Party stayed in power for eleven years due to its success in improving people's lives and promoting individual freedoms and rights. The AK Party has continued to lead

other parties in its eagerness for more democratic reforms and national reconciliation for the Kurdish problem. However, ideological struggle has so far dominated the political scene in both Egypt and Tunisia. Leaders in those nations would be better off by

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focusing on services, some of which might be fulfilled with political will, voluntarism and a certain amount of funds. Ideological struggle led to a coup d'état in Egypt as a result of the unified opposition, which is a persistent concern for future stability.

During its first term, the AK Party controlled the majority of parliamentary seats but did not force a constitution amendment because it realized the numeric advantaged did not reflect the real balance of power in the country, considering the strong military and the bourgeoisie's financial power and hefty media outlets. Rather than starting an early all-in power struggle with the established elites, the AK Party depended on the support of the public that benefitted from improvements in their standard of living. The more the AK Party succeeded in policies of ser-

vice, the more the Party extended its powerbase among other groups and therefore gained greater legitimacy in the eyes of the elites. If compelled to challenge the military and its allies, the AK Party quickly turned to the public without escalating the struggle into a showdown. As the most important political tool, democratic legitimacy silenced the critiques and strengthened Erdoğan further.

### **Contrasts and Comparisons: Tunisia and Egypt and Turkey**

Although they did not start the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, the Islamist parties came to power relatively easily. The Islamist parties quickly distanced themselves from the secular-minded revolutionary youth in Egypt and Tunisia, as they probably considered the youth world-view a threat to their religious perspective. The AK Party's vision of politics appears distinct from the Ikhwan and al-Nahda's perspectives. While the former believes in pleasing people to stay in power, the latter feels they have to stay in power to bring an Islamic democracy, if any. The first perspective depends on democratic legitimacy, where more rights and popular consent guarantees in the maintenance of power. The Brotherhood perspective, however, depends on religious legitimacy from its grassroots organization and the tactics of power games that may not be very popular. This perspective seems similar to Erdoğan's perspective that the popular majority may not be always right.

It is important to note that al-Nahda, like the AK Party, tried hard to avoid an ideological clash and adopt the Turkish democratic discourse that trusts the decisions of the Muslim-majority. However, Salafi groups and the radical flank of the al-Nahda demanded a speedy enactment of Sharia law. In a country with a consolidated secular lifestyle and powerful secular intellectuals and organizations, such as trade unions, the calls for Sharia led to violent street clashes. The radical Salafi groups are the forerunners of these attacks, which were aimed at the symbols of secular life-styles, such as art galleries and shops that sell alcohol. These groups are thought to have committed the assassinations of secular leaders such as Chukri Belaid and Mohammed Brahimi. The inability of the al-Nahda-led government to control, or clearly distance itself from these radical groups, made al-Nahda the target of criticism and opposition. The government finally came to the conclusion that the radical Salafi groups are against democracy and stability by denouncing Ansar al-Sharia as a terrorist group. However, the move came too late, as it caused a great problem and political instability in Tunisia.

The situation in Egypt is more complicated due to the nation's size and critical location in regional politics. There are many regional and global powers that oppose the success of the democratic process in Egypt, let alone the success of the Islamists. Unlike Tunisia, Egypt has a strong military that enjoyed power (as in

Turkey), a significant non-Muslim minority, proximity to Israel and centrality in Arab politics. As a strong Egypt will have enormous repercussions, everyone in the region is paying close attention to developments in Egypt and attempting to influence the flow of events according to their interests. This sensitivity caused a military coup with the support of the Saudi and Emirati governments. The reasons for the coup aside, it appears as though the Morsi government did not anticipate the coup d'état. Having experienced multiple military interventions, the AK Party leaders were more alert of the interaction of military personnel during the party's early years and the latest protests in Gezi (Taksim) Park. After some hesitation, the AK Party leaders mobilized their supporters to take to the streets simultaneously to reduce the legitimacy of the opposing protesters. However, as previously noted, the Brotherhood decided to mobilize its supporters mainly after the coup. Ultimately, prevention proved to be less costly than reversal.

Erdogan's AK Party focused on democratic legitimacy, rather than a religious legitimacy. The necessity of a strong connection between the ruled and the ruler was a lesson Erdogan learned while serving as the mayor of Istanbul in the 1990s. He continued to maintain this principle of gaining hearts and minds of citizens when he became Prime Minister. For example, Erdogan replaced some powerful ministers when they lost elections in their districts, ensuring they have to please the public. Maintaining this

popular support allowed him to rule and helped limit the influence of powerful elites in the country. In Egypt and Tunisia, the Islamist parties hesitated for too long about the relevance of religion in democracy. Their *shura* principle is slowly being equated with democratic rule but has not yet translated into a modern notion of democracy. This created a gap between their commitment to popular legitimacy and religious legitimacy.

Due to Egypt's centrality, the potential success of the Ikhwan-affiliated government caused concerns in countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran, Israel and even the United States. Libya, Turkey and Qatar were the only nations that wished success for a democratic Egypt. Turkey sees democracy as a way to ensure development in Egypt. Turkey's close relations with the Egyptian government were due to the AK Party's support for democratic legitimacy rather than supporting one part of Egypt's domestic struggle over the other. Other countries viewed the success of the Ikhwan-model as a direct threat to their position in the Middle East. Unlike Egypt, the AK Party did not have external supporters for a military coup in Turkey. In fact, its commitment to improving democracy and human rights drew a degree of support from Europe and the US.

During the government's early period, the AK Party wisely adopted the goal of entering the European Union. Due to their western orientation, the secular institutions and elites could not back down from this goal. How-

ever, the Ergenekon plotters that attempted to overthrow Erdogan chose an anti-AK Party and anti-western stance. As they envisioned a Baath-like regime rather than a democratic one, the West did not help them. Although the Brotherhood had cordial relations with the US, some factions

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in America and certain US allies in the Gulf were not in line with the Obama administration. In general, secular and liberal opposition groups in Egypt and Tunisia had strong ties with the West and global powers. Unlike the AK Party, the Brotherhood-affiliated governments underestimated the resources and effectiveness of the liberal and secular groups.

Before the military coup, the issue in Egypt was ideological polarization that prevented any dialogue, as the Islamists and secularists see each other as enemies. So far, they have failed to build a level of trust among them in order to have constructive dialogue. However, a common ground could have been found based on freedom, human rights and democracy. The persistence of this struggle has been especially against the interests of the Ikhwan government because it has

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distracted them from the suffering of the wider public and hurt foreign tourism and investment. Therefore, the government should have been the main party encouraging dialogue and calming the political arena by building trust with others groups that helped topple Mubarak.

While there is no easy solution for the political crisis in post-coup Egypt, Tunisia is doing better but the risks of destabilization remain. Islamist groups in both nations need to adopt a democratic and gradual method to deal with other groups and cope with socio-economic problems. They can still achieve this by trusting the will of the public in their respective countries and by opening dialogue with other non-militant groups. Engaging in ideological warfare without providing food, security and dignity to its citizens will not allow any party to stay in power for long. The Turkish experience under Erbakan and Erdogan shows that an ideological stance may help maintain the commitment of the movement's members

and some conservative sectors of society but it will not gain the support of the wider society. Utilizing rhetoric of victimization, conspiracy and helplessness will have limited effect. Emphasis on greater freedom, democracy and popular legitimacy will bring moderation, enlarging the power-base and silencing the critics of radicalism.

### Conclusion

The secular parameters in Turkey permitted the rise of a political party independent of religious groups and it succeeded by allowing the AK Party to address all religious groups. This may be an option for Egypt, where the Brotherhood as a religious organization maintained a tight grip on the Freedom and Justice Party, leaving the party with little autonomy to deal with the political situation and problems. Turkey's experience also shows that improving people's standard of living by delivering services ensures a party's long-term success. The Ikhwaan in Egypt and al-Nahda in Tunisia need to clearly distance themselves from radical groups and approach the centrist popular base in order for society as a whole to enjoy the freedom of expression, association and protest, while providing security by punishing the violators of public safety or those calling for the killing of secular political figures. ■