

# Moderate Islam and Secularist Opposition in Turkey: implications for the world, Muslims and secular democracy

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*ABSTRACT* Developing an argument based in theories of democratic consolidation and religious competition, and discussing the reasons for the secularist opposition to the government, this article analyses how government by a party rooted in moderate Islamism may affect Turkey's peculiar secular democracy, development and external relations and how Muslims in the world relate to modernization and democracy. Arguing that secularism in advanced democracies may be a product of democracy as much as it is the other way around, the article maintains that democratic consolidation may secure further consolidation of Turkish secularism and sustainable moderation of Turkish political Islam. Besides democratic Islamic-conservative actors and other factors, democratic consolidation requires strong democratic-secularist political parties so that secularist and moderate Islamist civilian actors check and balance each other. Otherwise, middle class value divisions and mistrust in areas like education and social regulation may jeopardise democratisation and economic modernisation and continuing reconciliation of Islamism with secular democracy and modernity.

The main goal of this article is to examine what the current divisions in Turkey over political Islam may imply for the way we envision the relationships between religion, Islam and modernisation, especially the relationship between democratic consolidation and secularism.

Following its landslide electoral victory in July 2007, Turkey's governing AKP (Justice and Development Party), a party rooted in Islamism, has been solidified as a leading political actor and given a historical opportunity to reshape Turkey's social and political mainstream. How will this affect Turkey's modernisation, secular democracy and external relations, and what

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does all this mean for the world in regard to Muslims' relations with modernity and secular democracy? At first, the answers to these questions seem to depend on the nature of the AKP itself: whether it is a secretly Islamist, moderate Islamist, or Islamic-conservative democratic party, and how sincere its commitments are to secular democracy. Alternatively one may ask to what extent Islamic principles, or, for that matter, religious principles, can be compatible with secular democracy in the long run, a critical question throughout the world.

A more complete analysis reveals that the party's legacy will depend as much on the party's own nature and decisions as it will on the nature and decisions of the secularist political actors. There are no fixed answers. The AKP as a party and ideology, and moderate Islamism in general, are dynamic. Religious politics is a product of both its own roots and its domestic and international political and economic milieu. One can foresee different AKPs, and thus different prospects for Turkish secularism, depending on various factors such as Turkey's political system, economic development, external support, and social divisions over values. The key intervening variable is democratic consolidation.

The establishment and, so far, performance of the AKP forms a major example of the 'moderation' of political Islam through the embrace of democracy, modernity and liberal global economy, as opposed to 'radical' Islamism, which pursues an Islamic state, as in Iran or Saudi Arabia.<sup>1</sup> The party defines itself as conservative democratic, and its record in government since 2002 'has been markedly moderate'.<sup>2</sup> It has achieved path-breaking reforms in democratisation, and continuous economic stability and growth. It secured the start of Turkey's EU accession talks in 2005. It became the first governing party since 1960 to have the courage to stand up to the military's interference in politics by publicly denouncing the military's criticism of the government.<sup>3</sup>

The party's moderation cannot be explained away as an unintended and unreliable product of opportunistic steps in response to 'lucky coincidences'.<sup>4</sup> The party was able to use its opportunities because a young and pragmatic generation of Turkish Islamists critical of the old guard decided to found the AKP with a deliberately chosen pro-democracy programme and secular outlook. They did so by learning from past mistakes and with an eye to appealing to broader segments of the electorate.<sup>5</sup>

Yet significant portions of Turkish society and the secularist military and judiciary continue to suspect the AKP of anti-secularism, and, for that matter, anti-democratic tendencies. Secularist rallies in spring 2007 drew millions of people. The rallies are indicative of a major socio-political rift in this pivotal emerging market and democracy. How this rift is managed will determine whether Turkish democracy will finally become a full rather than a guided democracy, where democracy includes not only free elections but also the freedom of elected governments to pursue policies disapproved of by the military on issues such as secularism and the Kurdish question. It will also determine the evolution of Turkish secularism and political Islam.

### **Which AKP and which moderation?**

The AKP represents Turkey's new modernisers with Islamist and Islamic-conservative roots, who both benefited from secular modernisation and deeply resented its perceived anti-religious practices.<sup>6</sup> One way to predict its future evolution and impact on Turkish democracy could be via a crude application of what may be called the 'democratic moderation thesis'.<sup>7</sup> According to this thesis, the more the AKP participates in democracy, the more it will 'moderate' and contribute to democratisation and modernisation. The more it is excluded, the less it will moderate, jeopardising further democratisation and modernisation, and relations with the Western world.

As I will elaborate in the sections ahead, we need a more multifaceted understanding of Turkish politics and of moderate Islamism to make a more accurate prediction. The moderation of Turkish Islam in the example of the AKP did not result from simple, unrestrained participation in democracy, but from a complex mixture of incentives to participate, and disincentives to accentuate Islam, in a guided democracy.

In fact, roughly speaking, three different scenarios can produce three different AKPs and thus three different moderate Islamisms. A major determinant of these scenarios will be the AKP's secularist rivals.

The first scenario could occur if the AKP is rivaled by weak and fragmented secularist political parties. In this case the party would be emboldened to launch further legal-institutional reforms which may initially strengthen democracy, for example by reducing the military's clout. One could also argue that the weakness of the parties in the center-right and center-left might encourage the party to adopt more moderate policies to fill the gap. Simultaneously, however, if unrivalled, the party might be unable to resist promoting a deeper and faster Islamisation, not necessarily of government, but of society in education and social regulation. Moralists within the party may gain clout at the expense of pragmatists. Such social Islamisation would eventually be self-destructive for the AKP. It would jeopardise modernisation via an eventual deterioration of the relations with the Western world, especially with the EU, which could not embrace an increasingly Islamic Turkey in the face of rising Islamophobia in Europe. This scenario would also jeopardise democracy as a result of the interventions of the military, which cannot accept the rapid erosion of secular modernism envisioned by Atatürk. Democratisation would also be undermined if it is the fear of military intervention that dissuades the party from accentuating Islamisation.

The second scenario could occur if the AKP is balanced by strong secularist political parties, but those which hold secular-nationalism above democratisation. In this case, the AKP might capitalise on religious nationalism in order to rival secular nationalism. Nationalism is likely to remain a major force in Turkey, not necessarily as a political ideology but as a value, for three main reasons. First, the Kurdish question and the re-escalation of the Kurdish separatist violence are fomenting Turkish nationalism, while rising

Turkish nationalism itself, the rise of Kurdish nationalism in the Middle East, and the possibility of a Kurdish state in neighboring Iraq are fomenting Kurdish nationalism. Second, the Turkish military is encouraging Turkish nationalism as an antidote to both Kurdish separatism and Islamism. Third, Turkish nationalism is fuelled by the negative attitudes in some European countries toward Turkey's EU membership prospects, attitudes which are widely publicised in Turkey. In this environment the AKP may find it necessary to compete with secular-nationalist rivals by promoting Turkish nationalism with Islamic-conservative (Sunni Muslim) overtones.

In this case Turkey and the world would face a hard choice between two authoritarian forces: one secular-nationalist and the other Islamic-conservative nationalist. Neither force would be able to deepen democratic modernisation because competitive nationalist agendas would produce inward-looking economic policies and would exacerbate the Kurdish conflict by deepening the resentments of Turkish Kurds. Sunni Muslim nationalism would also alienate the Alevi Muslim population. Because of their weak democratic credentials, both forces would also face problems in deepening relations with the EU and the USA. Relations with the USA might also be undermined more directly because Turkey may venture to invade northern Iraq, despite US disapproval. All in all, Turkey would remain a flawed democracy and a failed economic miracle at best, and a case of democratic reversal and a semi-developed economy at worst.

The third and most promising scenario could occur if the AKP is checked and balanced by strong secularist political parties that manage to translate secularist and nationalist concerns into political programmes combining modernisation with further democratisation. Thus, henceforth, by strong secularist parties, I will be referring to voter support as well as ability to produce well thought-out social and economic programmes, minimise corruption within party ranks, and to build long-term links with constituencies. In this case pragmatists within the AKP would remain in control in order to appeal to mainstream voters. Both Turks and the world would have a healthy choice between two projects of democratic modernisation in Turkey, one Islamic-conservative but largely secular, and one secularist. Secularist voters would no longer look to the military as a guarantor of secularism because the AKP's project of moderate Islamisation would be checked by democratic secularist forces. Islamic conservatives would not need to capitalise on religious nationalism or Islamic radicalism because they would have a fair chance of coming to power through democratic processes and implementing some of their agenda. This scenario would also have a good chance of sustaining rapid economic development and deepening relations with the EU and the USA.

To accurately gauge the likelihood of each scenario and the consequences for 'secularism', we need a closer look at the secularist grievances and the theoretical links between secularism and democracy.

### **The nature of the secularist mobilization: implications for Turkey and the world**

Many of the speakers at and organisers of the secularist rallies appeared to advocate extreme nationalist or secularist views which find weak support among the Turkish electorate. Given the moderate record of the AKP, what motivated the ordinary participants at the rallies? This mass mobilisation of secularism is a new phenomenon in a society where Islam is a major part of the culture. In many ways it was hard to describe the participants, to understand their motivations and to assess the implications of their actions.<sup>8</sup>

The rallies were triggered by the AKP's nomination of the then Foreign Affairs Minister Gül for president.<sup>9</sup> It was considered threatening by the protesters that politicians with an Islamist background could control both parliament and the presidency. The possibility of Prime Minister Erdoğan's candidacy itself had earlier been strongly opposed by secularists. Gül also faced opposition because his wife wore an Islamic-type headscarf, which its critics call a 'turban'.<sup>10</sup> In the secularists' perception the turban symbolises one's opposition to Atatürk's secular reforms. Thus, for them, seeing the country's first lady wearing it would symbolise a major shift of power in society.

The rallies, however, indicated a more complex rift which was hard for outside observers to describe. Was the rift about piety versus non-piety? Secular enlightenment versus religious revivalism? Class conflict? The mass participation in the rallies contradicted the framework of 'secular elites versus Islamic masses', with which outside observers are accustomed to analysing conflicts over secularism in Muslim societies. Some journalists wrote about '*secularized* Turks aspiring to a Western lifestyle'.<sup>11</sup> Some described a 'chasm between the secular and the pious', implying that piety, a matter of faith, and secularism, an ideology or set of values of separating faith and worldly affairs, exclude each other.<sup>12</sup> Others referred to 'urban, secular Turks' versus 'the broad base of devout Turks from the country's heartland'.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Secularism and moderate Islam as middle class phenomena*

The new religious-conservative elite are challenging the status of the secularist state elite. The new elite ascended to power by challenging old-style Islamists of the Erbakan tradition and culturally Muslim-conservative yet secularist politicians of the Demirel tradition. Economically competition is occurring between the secularist big business elite and the recently emerged Islamic-conservative business elite.<sup>14</sup> After all, the AKP came to power when both the political centre and part of the economic centre collapsed in 2001 following financial crises. Most Turks correctly blamed the corruption of political and economic elites for the crises.

However, more than an elite struggle, the current battle is occurring in the socio-cultural realm between two middle classes: the secularist middle class

and the new religious–conservative middle class. The former is sceptical of Islamism of all sorts and the latter is drawn to a moderate and pro-modern sort of Islamism.

Interestingly moderate Islam may produce different implications for the secularist Turkish middle class and the world. Followers of Turkish politics and the AKP in the world include Islamists seeking recognition in order to participate in democratic politics, Arab democrats and autocrats concerned that transition to democracy may bring Islamists to power, the EU, trying to gauge who the true democrats and Europhiles are in Turkey, and people throughout the world concerned about Islamic extremism and the lack of democracy in Muslim countries. For many of these actors a moderate party like the AKP can create a positive example by showing the world how Islam can coexist with secular, multiparty democracy. In their eyes a moderate Islam that is peaceful and respectful of individualism, secular laws, a market-oriented economic system and democratic competition is surely preferable to ‘radical Islam’, which is keen to control the state and the economy, to institute religious law, and to employ violence.

#### *Turkish secularism and secularist mobilisation*

For secularist protesters in Turkey, however, moderate Islam seems to be more dangerous than radical Islam. The protesters include staunch secularists sceptical of religion altogether. But they also include Muslims, pious and non-pious, who are comfortable with the basic principles, if not all the practice of, Turkish secularism.

Anti-religious ideas might have influenced some of the Kemalist reforms which laid down the basic principles of Turkey’s secular, or ‘laicist’ system. However, the system that emerged does not oppose religion. Nor does it envision an absolute separation of religion and state as in the USA.<sup>15</sup> Its laws and political institutions are based in strictly secular principles. But it also exemplifies high state regulation of Islam in the name of promoting national unity, of secularising social and political life, of making room for modernisation/Westernization and, arguably, of curbing Sunni Islam’s competitive tendencies, which will be discussed shortly.

Some state involvement in religious affairs, and vice versa, is common in democracies. Many European democracies such as Denmark have state churches, and others such as Germany restrict proselytising.<sup>16</sup> However, Turkey distinguishes itself by the degree of public involvement in, and control of, religion, more so even than in France. The Turkish constitution tasks the state with providing religious services via the Directorate of Religious Affairs and with providing moral education. State involvement in religious services and education has increased over time with the policies of centre-right governments and of the military regime in 1980–83. The latter promoted Islam as an antidote to communism and the politicisation of young people, echoing the Brzezinski doctrine of establishing a ‘green crescent’ surrounding the USSR’s southern belly.



Through religious services and education the Turkish state attempts to influence social norms and culture by offering a version of Islam that is apolitical, rationalist and does not seek to regulate all spheres of life. In effect the state itself promotes a type of moderate Islam, in the production of which it tries to maintain a partial monopoly position. For those who are comfortable with this type of religion, the main threat is seen as another form of moderate Islam, not radical Islam. Thus community-based moderate Islam which comprises Islamic brotherhoods and other faith-based networks promoting their own versions of pro-modern Islam, a major constituency for the AKP, competes with the state-sponsored religion while also co-operating with it where necessary for survival and self-advancement.

Secularists understand that radical Islamism has little potential to rule in Turkey. Atatürk's reforms transformed society deeply, secularism and multiparty democracy have relatively long legacies, and the military and western alliances oppose radical Islamism. Thus, although the majority of Turks consider themselves religious, they are 'non-conservative' in the sense that they are willing to reconcile their faith with the opportunities that democracy, modernity and largely secular, ie worldly, lifestyles offer.<sup>17</sup> It is unlikely that they would support a revolutionary Islamism.

However, the majority of the Turkish public may conceivably support a moderate Islamism. This may lead to the gradual Islamisation of social life because of Islam's place within the Turkish culture, social pressures, and Sunni Islam's competitive structure. Sunni Islam, the dominant form of Islam in Turkey as well as in the rest of the world, does not have a central doctrinal authority. Despite historical and modern attempts to institutionalise 'traditional' Islamic jurisprudence, the basic principle upon which people become religious authorities is that other Muslims recognise their knowledge of religion and respect their interpretations of the faith, called *fatwas*.<sup>18</sup> In effect Sunni Islam has a free market system of religious interpretation regulated only by weakly institutionalised informal norms. Under different circumstances, this nature can support rigid or flexible, and pro-modern or conservative interpretations.<sup>19</sup>

With less regulation of community-based Islamic networks in Turkey, the resulting 'vitality in religious markets' may give more voice to interpretations that are politically-economically liberal but socially conservative, or interpretations that have dubious feasibility.<sup>20</sup> For example, both state-sponsored and community-based teachings may endorse women's participation in the labour force. However, community-based Islam may argue that segregation of the sexes is necessary for such participation, or that polygamy is acceptable, while state-sponsored Islam shuns interpretations undermining gender equality. Another example is that, while both types of teachings would endorse financial development, community-based Islamic teachings may argue that Islamic, interest-free banking should be encouraged.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, for secularists, radical Islam is easier to vilify and to justify restricting within democracy. Moderate Islam's zeal to embrace modern lifestyles and its rejection of revolutionary methods make it hard to justify restricting it within a democratic system.

Thus the fact that the AKP has not changed ‘a single law that directly challenged the secular constitution’ is little comfort to the party’s opponents.<sup>22</sup> The new breed of moderate Islamic parties in the world has fewer ideological and state-centred, and more cultural and society-centred goals.<sup>23</sup> Arguably Islamism could not produce *political* projects envisioning Islamic states and political spheres with indigenously Islamic rules and goals.<sup>24</sup> Thus its focus might have shifted to creating Islamic social spheres.

The programme and practice of the AKP indicate that its priorities lie in strengthening democracy and Islamic communities, and in promoting a more Islamic–conservative social and political mainstream. While doing this, the AKP encourages the development of Islamic lifestyles, values, and teachings more at home with modern ways of life, especially for less modernised segments of society. This is good for the world for it helps Muslims to reconcile with modernity. Exactly this, however, may help to explain why ordinary citizens and civil society actors who normally fail to mobilise to participate in mass protests, mobilised against AKP rule. People seem to be sensitive, or oversensitive from the perspective of the AKP, to the little signs of Islamisation they observe in their daily lives.

Their threat perceptions grow as Islamists become more secular and thus more visible, while remaining assertively religious. According to one survey, although the percentage of women covering their heads actually decreased between 1999 and 2006 from 69.1% to 60.2%, most people (64.1%) felt that the wearing of ‘headscarf or turban’ had increased.<sup>25</sup> This apparent gap between fact and perception may partly reflect selective attention: people notice headscarf-wearing women more because of their fear of Islamisation. It is also possible, however, that, even though fewer women now cover their heads, more of them are wearing the Islamic type of headscarf (without calling it a turban), and that they have simultaneously become more visible in public life.

For the democratic world, it may be desirable that Turkish society is peacefully transformed to a more democratic albeit a more Islamic–conservative society. However, this prospect may be objectionable to major portions of Turkish society who are comfortable with the current role of religion in society and who fear the gradual erosion of the advances of the secular republic in areas such as women’s rights.

### *Secularist concerns*

In accordance with the above analysis, the three major complaints secularists express all regard piecemeal administrative decisions and the government’s social influence, not major legal–political changes.

The first is the public sector’s recruitment policies (*kadrolaşma*) under the AKP, which allegedly favour people with Islamic–conservative credentials, such as those who have graduated from religious *imam-hatip* schools.<sup>26</sup> There are no objective data to verify this claim; the AKP rejects it and favouritism had been a pastime for past Turkish governments of a more secular kind also.



However, with the AKP, *kadrolaşma* generates more reaction because of suspicions of gradual Islamisation. The government missed several opportunities to dispel these doubts by displaying its commitment to meritocracy in appointments such as the Governor of the Central Bank.<sup>27</sup>

Second, nowhere do *kadrolaşma* and other administrative practices draw more opposition than in education. Again, there is little hard evidence for this, except that about 800 civil servants were transferred from the Directorate of Religious Affairs to the Ministry of Education.<sup>28</sup> In universities the party encouraged the appointment of rectors who are critical of secularist restrictions and tried to facilitate the admission of graduates of *imam-hatip* schools to universities.<sup>29</sup> Complaints regarding primary and secondary schools include the gradual Islamisation of textbooks, for example by gradually replacing the theory of evolution with versions of creationism. Critics also charge that there is tacit encouragement of Islamic conservatism, for example by endorsing or encouraging the practice of *namaz* (Muslim praying), the distribution of religious reading material in school grounds, or teachers arguing that dating is sinful.<sup>30</sup> Insofar as they are true, these developments may be direct or indirect results of the AKP's rule. Knowing the government's Islamist roots, bureaucrats and civilians may feel that it is now more acceptable to promote religious values.

Third, the most controversial secularist claim regards the AKP's pro-business and pro-globalisation stand. Many secularists believe that the party is pursuing EU membership, democratisation and integration with the world economy because these provide the party with more freedom in pursuing its agenda of gradual Islamisation. The process of EU-led democratisation, and IMF-led economic restructuring began under the coalition government before the AKP but gained momentum during the AKP government. Legal – political reforms solidified individual freedoms and reduced the military's institutional involvement in government. Teaching and broadcasting in Kurdish began in limited forms. Political stability provided by the single party government resulted in high economic performance. Inflation fell to below 10%. Annual growth reached an average rate of 7.3% between 2002 and 2006. All these reforms moved Turkey closer to Western standards and increased the world's confidence in Turkey's democracy and economy.

These developments led to unprecedented growth in foreign investments and to EU involvement in Turkish affairs. Direct foreign investment in Turkey increased from US\$1.14 billion in 2002 to \$20 billion in 2006.<sup>31</sup> This capital inflow, however, caused significant appreciation of the Turkish currency and contributed to a current account deficit reaching a record 8% of GNP. This deficit is mostly financed by foreign short- and long-term investments.

The secularist perception is that this economic environment makes it hard to oppose the AKP's alleged plans for gradual Islamisation. 'Traditional safeguards', such as military intervention or the destabilisation of governments through media campaigns have become much costlier than before: they may cause strong negative reactions from the EU and economic crises as a result of sudden outflows of foreign capital.

### **Democratic consolidation**

Democratic consolidation is a theoretical construction often described as democracy becoming ‘the only game in town’.<sup>32</sup> More specifically, it can be conceptualised as the strengthening of democracy such that it becomes *unthinkable* for the great majority of the political actors to reverse democratically made decisions, curtail basic freedoms and employ coercive means to pursue political gain, even during severe political and socio-economic crises. This definition only defines an ideal outcome which in practice can only be approximated. It is not an absolute state. Any democracy can revert to authoritarianism under certain circumstances.

Arguably, however, in an advanced democracy it would require major upheavals in circumstances for a reversal to become imaginable. By contrast, in unconsolidated democracies such reversals are easily ‘thinkable’, creating a vicious circle. Knowing that overall commitment to democracy is low, people invest in authoritarian safeguards, which further diminish overall commitment to, and quality of, democracy.

Thus, democratic consolidation requires that the major political actors build a certain degree of trust among each other. Actors must believe that other actors will not use democracy to pursue goals that are fundamentally threatening to them. Otherwise they will keep authoritarian practices such as supporting military interventions within their portfolio of thinkable practices. They will do so as a credible threat to deter their ‘rival’ actors from actions they see as unacceptable. They will also be willing to limit democratic freedoms to prevent other actors from pursuing their unacceptable agenda.

From the secularists’ perspective, the emergence of such trust requires that Islamic–conservative actors embrace secularism fully, ie not only instrumentally but as a long-term commitment. According to this view, democratic consolidation hinges upon the consolidation of secularism. This view is prevalent among Turkish secularists. Former president Sezer and the chief of staff have accused the AKP of embracing secularism ‘in words only’.<sup>33</sup> In other words, secularists accuse Islamists of ‘preference falsification’: embracing secularism publicly but not privately.<sup>34</sup>

### **Democratic consolidation and secularism**

Some preference falsification prevails among Turkish Islamists because politicians who dare to question secularism publicly face vicious public campaigns from the secularists. It is rational for party members to keep certain thoughts to themselves.

However, what they keep in private may not necessarily be an opposition to secularism altogether but adherence to a more Islamic version of secularism. Secularists and Islamic–conservatives have different conceptions of secularism, emphasising different aspects of it. Islamic–conservatives highlight the aspect of freedom of religion. Secularists emphasise the separation of religion and state.<sup>35</sup>

Rather than secularism consolidating democracy, one may argue that successful democratisation consolidates secularism. There are many secular states that are not democracies. But all consolidated democracies have some type of a secular system whereby both aspects of secularism, ie freedom of religion and the autonomy of state affairs from religion, are generally provided. Despite the revival of religion's social and political influence in recent decades, few doubt that people in these countries *generally* enjoy freedom of religion and that governments are practically 'autonomous' from religion.

The exact definition and boundaries of secularism differ across countries. But all established democracies have some type of a consolidated secular system enjoying acceptance by the majority of the socio-political actors. The existing institutional entanglements of religion and state in these countries may be vestiges of the historical process of democratization, when state tried to control religion and religion was given a stake in government so that a certain degree of trust could emerge between these actors. In this sense the ultimate insurance of secularism may be democratic consolidation. The current challenge for Western democracies such as the UK and Germany, which managed to establish democratic consolidation *vis-à-vis* Christianity in the past, may be to achieve the same type of reconciliation with their Muslim minorities.

This thesis is consistent with Alfred Stepan's thesis that democratic consolidation *vis-à-vis* religion requires 'twin tolerations'. Rather than a wall of separation between church and state, he argues, democratisation requires 'constant political construction and reconstruction of the twin tolerations'.<sup>36</sup> Stepan formulates twin tolerations in terms of three freedoms: the freedom of governments from any 'constitutionally privileged' influence by religious *institutions*; complete freedom of worship; and the freedom of the pious to express their values in civil society and politics unless these limit other people's liberties.

However, Stepan does not specify how actors solve problems of trust during the construction and reconstruction of twin tolerations. The emergence of twin tolerations may be a particularly difficult process in predominantly Muslim countries formal institutionalisation of religion is low and where there potentially is a free market of religious interpretations.

### **Long-term difficulties of twin tolerations and democratisation**

The Turkish secularist rallies display both positive and negative characteristics with respect to democratic consolidation. On one hand, a frequent slogan in the rallies is 'neither *Sharia* nor a coup, a democratic Turkey'. On the other hand, the secularist middle class may view the military as a guarantor unless strong democratic checks and balances are created against perceived threats to secular democracy.

These democratic checks and balances should not be understood strictly as formal institutional constraints and divisions of powers (eg a reformed constitution). The question is whether or not effective checks and balances

are created by the political system as a whole, ie its laws and institutions, customs and norms, political parties, and voters. For twin tolerations, these checks and balances should also be flexible enough to keep religious actors within the democratic game.

By comparison the AKP and its constituency now display a stronger rhetorical commitment to democracy. Western-style democracy, Turkey's EU prospects and open economy provide freedoms that aid the pursuit of more religious freedoms and a revised secularism. However, whenever the EU integration seemed to work to protect secularist interests or to undermine an Islamic agenda, the AKP turned critical of the EU processes. This happened, for example, when the European Court of Human Rights turned down a Turkish woman's application against the headscarf ban, and when the EU pressured the AKP to withdraw its proposal to criminalise adultery.<sup>37</sup> The strength of the AKP's commitment to democracy is as yet insufficiently clear when it requires the upholding of the freedoms of secularists and of disadvantaged groups such as ethnic Kurds, women, gays, or the Alevi minority who are demanding the same privileges as the Sunni Muslims. Importantly, it is also unclear what the party's reformed secularism would look like.

Such examples do not necessarily imply that the AKP's Western outlook and democratic commitments are insincere. The AKP's ideology should be seen as an ongoing project. The party's constituency includes Islamic-conservative, and, partially, secular-liberal business groups and middle classes, who stand to gain from economic integration with the world, which is made possible by a democratic system.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, a large literature on the ideological moderation of religious parties suggests that ideological moderation follows political moderation.<sup>39</sup> If Turkey's democratisation can be sustained, the AKP's moderation can also be sustained.

The path to sustained moderation is still a difficult process, however. Democratic consolidation will require continuing economic development and external support, and major ideological adaptation, from both secularists and Islamists, to be achieved and become sustainable. In particular, the military, which continues to enjoy high public prestige, will have to shed its long tradition of interfering in politics.<sup>40</sup> While a coup is unlikely, the military now seems to prefer 'softer' methods to influence politics, such as announcements criticising the government and the involvement of the retired military officers in civil society organisations and the media. A military conflict with Iraqi Kurds may increase the military's weight in politics.<sup>41</sup> The rise of pan-Kurdish nationalism in the region poses a great threat to Turkish democracy.

A solid EU commitment to Turkey's EU prospects would greatly benefit democratic consolidation. Simultaneously, democratic consolidation itself would increase the Europeans' support of Turkey's membership, while reducing the public's support of the military's political role.

From the perspective of creating inter-actor trust, one weakness of the Turkish case is that the AKP does not call itself Islamist, or, for that matter, Muslim–democratic. This raises questions about the AKP's ability to speak for Islamists and to make long-term commitments in their

name. For democratic consolidation actors should be able to make 'credible commitments' to each other regarding the rules of democracy and the boundaries between religion and state.<sup>42</sup> Its more conservative members and supporters may abandon the AKP if it continues to neglect Islamic priorities such as removing the restrictions on the wearing of headscarves, especially if economic benefits for its followers dwindle after a lost election or poor economic performance.

From the perspective of Muslims' reconciliation with the democratic modern world, another crucial question is how much the AKP will manage to be an agent of indigenous ideological change by encouraging the development of arguments in favour of pluralist democracy that are 'deeply embedded in [Islam's] comprehensive doctrine'.<sup>43</sup> The Muslim world faces many philosophical and intellectual challenges, such as identifying the status of *Sharia* in modern democracies and how inherently 'Western', and thus foreign, modernity is.<sup>44</sup>

### *Trust and ambiguity*

The building of trust also requires that actors clearly articulate their positions. If actors do not know what the other parties' interests are, or do not believe that their expressed interests match their real, long-term interests, they may not participate in democratic bargaining and commit to their agreements. A greater problem in Turkey is that ambiguous policy positions encourage actors to speculate about, and exaggerate, how radical the others' positions really are.

A recent example is the so-called 'bikini controversy'. In spring 2007 the secularist media reported some swimsuit producers' complaints about the municipality of Istanbul, which is run by the AKP. Allegedly the administration was rejecting billboard applications for swimsuit advertisements showing models in bikinis. Secularist commentators argued that this was yet another example of 'creeping Islamization'.<sup>45</sup> Most importantly for the subject here, the AKP did not defend its practices. Rather, the party simply denied that such a policy existed. Bikini ads reappeared on Istanbul streets.

In a consolidated democracy, this could be a 'normal' debate regarding the use of the female body in commercials. The AKP could claim, for example, that some of these advertisements objectify women, or simply that they are inappropriate in a majority Muslim culture. In this case the voters could make an informed decision about who is right. Rather than seeing in this debate a fundamental threat to secularism, secularist actors would see an Islamic-conservative policy that could be revoked in the next election. As it happened in the Turkish case, however, the fact that the government denied its actions raised the question of whether it conceals its intentions in other areas also. Ambiguity lends credibility to exaggerated charges about intentions.

The bikini controversy epitomises a general phenomenon. Facing secularist criticism of its actions regarding more important questions than the bikini

controversy—say the legal definition of secularism or education policies—the AKP simply denies or withdraws its actions. The point here is not a normative one. The previous Islamist party in government, the Welfare Party, was forced to resign in 1997 as a result of a vicious media campaign and Islamist ‘witch hunt’ with the active involvement of the military. Against this background, any policy position the AKP publicly justifies on Islamic grounds risks being presented as a sign of the party’s hidden Islamist intentions.

The point is that this environment, where the party fails to clearly articulate where it stands on issues of secularism and social regulation, undermines the emergence of twin tolerations that is necessary for democratic consolidation. Such pressures are also felt by secularist democrats who may be willing to be more accepting of moderate Islamist actors. They are vulnerable to accusations of catering to Islamists.

### *The political party system*

Finally, the major factor weakening the prospects for democratic consolidation are the weaknesses of the Turkish political party system. The system has some relative strengths.<sup>46</sup> But it fails to encourage the recruitment of able individuals into politics, and it is poor in intra-party policy debates, the production of party programmes with effective solutions to societal problems, compromise among parties, and parties efficiently communicating with their constituencies. The AKP owes part of its success to its relative overcoming of these weaknesses. Secularist political parties’ weaknesses undermine their ability to effectively check and balance the AKP. Their potential constituencies do not view them as reliable forces that can democratically protect their values and serve their long-term social and economic interests. Parties weak in the sense here also have a weak capacity to establish trust between each other, and to make long-term compromises and commitments necessary for democratic consolidation.

Military interventions and legal restrictions that the military rule in 1980–83 placed on party organisations and activities are a major reason why the parties have failed to establish strong organisations and ties with civil society. In addition, frequent economic crises have deprived parties of stable constituencies: electoral volatility has been high across individual parties.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, parties suffer from ‘internal party feuds and factional splits’, and ‘party switching among parliamentarians’.<sup>48</sup> Especially but not exclusively in eastern Turkey, political patronage and clientelism continue to influence the preferences of major portions of the voters.

These problems of the party system were aggravated during the 1990s. Strong leaders remained in control of their parties, despite widespread corruption and the steady erosion of voter support for these parties. As one author put it ‘in a political landscape of kleptocracy run by a gerontocracy, there is little sign that political parties are run by democracy and it is a rare Turkish politician who pays heed to the electorate and voluntarily relinquishes power’.<sup>49</sup> Not surprisingly, voter support shifted steadily away



from the centre-right and centre-left parties, toward the religious and nationalist parties on the right which were seen as less corrupt.<sup>50</sup>

Religious parties had strong organisations with dedicated grassroots cadres, which helped them to increase their electoral support. In addition, the AKP established a modern organisation credited with establishing strong ties of communication with the voters. Initially the AKP also managed to create a more egalitarian intra-party democracy than any other Turkish party, although it somewhat retreated to authoritarianism after coming to power.<sup>51</sup> The AKP may also be suffering from ‘power malaise’, which may explain some allegations of corruption against the party members and why it insisted on electing its own candidate for president rather than seeking a compromise with the opposition.

By comparison, the AKP’s rivals suffer from all of the mentioned weaknesses and from fragmentation of similar parties. It is not clear whether attempts to merge the main opposition party CHP (Republican People’s Party) with the DSP (Democratic Left Party), and two centre-right parties, DYP (True Path Party) and ANAP (Motherland Party) will survive personal conflicts and produce stable parties.

Fragmentation and weakness generate a political style which rewards confrontation rather than compromise, and power politics rather than policy creation. In this political party culture ‘leaders are seen as heroes defending their parties against adversaries and the primary preoccupation is with “politics” rather than policy’.<sup>52</sup> The way to rise in politics is through loyalty to one’s leader and by avoiding policy debates.

Yet the goal of preventing Islamisation within democracy, which secularist parties claim to pursue, requires that these parties produce effective policies and solutions in areas from economics to foreign policy, which would enable them to repeatedly win elections. It also requires that secularist parties threaten to attract some of the AKP’s more moderate constituency by offering democratic solutions to questions such as the headscarf controversy, and a conciliatory rhetoric that would embrace rather than alienate pious voters. If they succeed, they can effectively balance the AKP, helping the latter to maintain its moderation. If they fail, ‘radical secularism’ may reverse Islamist moderation and widen the secularist–Islamist cleavage in Turkish society they so fear.<sup>53</sup>

Absent ‘strong’ and democratic secularist political parties, secularist mobilisation may fall prey to extreme nationalism and authoritarian tendencies that would endanger democratic consolidation. Absent such parties, the speakers and organisers of the secularist rallies tend to express more radical nationalistic and authoritarian views than do most of the participants, and the participants express what unites them: their patriotism, and the symbolism of Atatürk and his philosophy. But it would hurt their interests if their unprecedented political mobilisation produced extreme nationalist policies undermining Turkey’s EU relations and integration with the world economy.

For democratic consolidation the concerns of the secularist mobilisation need to be translated by political parties into democratic policies and

programmes. These need to explain what secularists propose in terms of political reforms and socio-economic policies, and to address a number of essential tradeoffs that secularists face. Is secularism more important than democracy? How would secularist policies protect secularism without polarising society? How would they protect secularism while at the same time advancing democratisation, economic development and EU relations?

### **Prospects for democratic consolidation**

The challenge for Turkey is to ensure that its ideological differences—especially in education, public recruitment and social life—are sorted out democratically, not by rallies on the streets or by resorting to authoritarian forces.<sup>54</sup>

A major factor increasing the prospects for democratic consolidation is economic development. In 2006 per capita income reached \$8600, which is one-and-a-half times the \$6000 threshold beyond which democratic reversals are considered to be highly unlikely.<sup>55</sup> Given what they have to lose, the bourgeoisie and the middle classes are unlikely to favour a democratic reversal. Nevertheless, a future economic crisis would challenge both the AKP's unity as a party and democratic consolidation.

In the long run democratic consolidation requires a strong political party system where secularist and religious–conservative parties effectively check and balance each other. The Turkish experience shows that free and fair elections coupled with a guided democracy and economic development can generate incentives for political Islam to moderate and to adopt democracy. But it also suggests that *sustainable* moderation by Islam coupled with democratic *consolidation* may require strong secularist democrats as much as it requires Muslim democrats.

The legal reforms since the 1990s, which removed some of the vestiges of military rule and eased the restrictions on political party activities, encourage all Turkish parties to build better ties with their constituencies.<sup>56</sup> These reforms should be supplemented with more reforms to fight political corruption and to improve intra-party democracy. For a better functioning democracy, the 10% national electoral threshold should also be reduced.

Finally, democratic consolidation requires that political parties build a consensus around goals they can agree on. Potential such goals include better democracy and human rights, economic development, sustainable EU relations, and preventing the rise of radical Islamism and extreme nationalism. Such a consensus should also envision an educational system that enables future generations, religious or not, to reason freely and critically and to choose the good life for themselves, while respecting the freedoms of others in society. In the long run this may be the ultimate guarantor of secular democracy as well as of religious freedoms, and would have positive implications well beyond Turkey's borders.

## Notes

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