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Turkey and Democracy in the Muslim World

*Mohamed Nawab Mohd Osman **

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THE RECENT results in the Turkish parliamentary elections serve as an important reminder that, contrary to the stereotype of the incompatibility between Islam and democracy, the two can coexist and are indeed compatible. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which also formed the last Turkish government, had increased its electoral support from 34% in 2002 to 47% in the July 22 elections. Western liberal stereotypes portray the picture of modern liberal principles and Islamic politics not being able to co-exist, strengthened by the experiences of undemocratic Islamist regimes in Iran, Sudan and Afghanistan. This portrayal may have become obsolete in light of the recent developments in Turkey.

In the elections, the victorious AKP does not fit these Western stereotypes. In fact, the competition in Turkey has been between an AK Party which is promoting democracy against the old Turkish political elite, the military commanders and the leaders of the old Republican Peoples' Party (CHP), who are extremist secularists supporting old-style programmes of "Westernization" and secularism at the expense of democracy. The elections were called after the AKP nominated Abdullah Gul, the foreign minister and a devout Muslim, to be president, which resulted in street protests by secularists over the fact that his wife wears a headscarf.

Turkish Model of Islamic Politics

Graham Fuller, in book *The Future of Political Islam* published in 2003 argued that the AKP government would be a serious test for the compatibility between Islam and democracy. Four and the half years after its initial win, the AKP has proven that a government with Islamic credentials can also promote robust economic development, enhance ties with the United States and Europe and galvanize support for its cause. The AKP has demonstrated that democracy and secularism in the Muslim world are not mutually exclusive, or have to grow only at the expense of the other. Perhaps most importantly, the AKP's victory could give voice to the emergence of "Muslim Democratic" parties throughout the Muslim world along the lines of the Christian Democratic parties in Europe.

The AKP successfully balanced the need to distance itself from its Islamist background to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the Turkish political elites. At the same time, they were able to appeal to their more Islamic constituencies by embodying the traditional values of Islam and maintaining Turkish links to its Islamic past. The idea of promoting a Turkish model of Islamic politics is not a new one. American policymakers, aware that their long-lasting support for the friendly authoritarian regimes in the Middle East led to strong anti-Americanism and radicalism, proposed a middle way through the creation of Islamist democracies that are friendly to the US. The logic of this approach is underlined by the belief that, just as there are radical, democrat or pro-violence lines under the roof of the left, there could be democrat, radical and pro-violence types among Islamist parties and groups. The key is

to support Islamist stance that are moderate and democratic along the line of the AKP.

Can the Turkish Model Work for the Muslim World?

The key problem in promoting the Turkish model is Turkey's negative image in the Muslim world. Most Muslims perceive Turkish modernization as de-Islamization and Westernization. Turkey's top down cultural reform and restrictions on Islamic symbols and identity in the public sphere are seen negatively. The regime of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, father of modern Turkey, is remembered for abolishing the Islamic Caliphate. The regime's repression of *Sufi* orders and *madrassahs* and its enforcement of compulsory Western dress codes on its populace are unacceptable even to many moderate Muslims. While some Arab countries such as Tunisia and Syria had attempted similar reform agendas, these reforms have not been implemented as radically as in Turkey.

Despite these negative perceptions, many Muslims draw a distinction between the Turkish state and the current Turkish government of the AKP. Many Islamic parties throughout the world draw inspiration from the experience of the AKP. For instance, prior to the publication by PAS, the Islamic Party of Malaysia, of its blueprint for an Islamic state, key members of the party had gone to Turkey to study the Turkish model of Islamic politics. The initial blueprint of the Islamic state (which was rejected by the more conservative elements in the party) encapsulated many features of the current Turkish government.

Similarly, the leaders of the Justice and Development Party (Adalat) in Morocco also began to reform the party along the lines of the AKP following the 2003 Casablanca bombings. In the 2002 Moroccan elections, the party had secured 42 out of the 325 seats in the Moroccan parliament. While it was initially more conservative in its outlook, it has followed the AKP's example by focusing on issues of justice and democracy rather than the promotion of Islamic laws or establishing a theocratic Islamic state. The fact that other Islamic parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan posted articles of support in their websites for the AKP following its electoral success means that there are some possibilities that these parties may also emulate the AKP Islamic position.

The West and Democracy in the Muslim World

The experience of the AKP in Turkey suggests that Islam and democracy are compatible. The US and other Western policymakers should heed the eminent scholar of Islam, John L. Esposito's call that "the United States restrain its one-dimensional attitude to democracy and recognize that the authentic roots of democracy exist in Islam". These moderate Islamists can prove to be important and legitimate partners for the West. Recognising the rise of these parties could lessen the anti-American and anti-Western sentiments which are currently prevalent in most of the Muslim world and will de-legitimise the radical Muslim groups.

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