Between Islamists and Kemalists

Islamist forces have moderated widely throughout the Middle East, but this has not been accompanied by parallel democratization. Turkey appears as an exception to this, as the transformation of Islamic actors and the secular Turkish state have been concurrent processes. As I have argued elsewhere, decades of unproductive confrontation within the confines of a democracy have taught both Islamic actors and the state the value and skills of “engagement,” a skill that most other social actors such as the secular left have failed to acquire in Turkey. Engagement is an umbrella term referring to a long continuum of non-confrontational interaction with the state ranging from contestation and negotiation to cooperation and alliance between Islamic actors and various branches of state. Most importantly, engagements have contributed to democratization by transforming both Islamic actors and the authoritatively secular state.1

By Islamic actors, I refer to AKP (Justice and Development Party) in government as well as the large and internationally active Gülen movement. They share a non-defiant positioning towards the authoritatively secular state. Unlike their forefathers Refah (Welfare) and the Nur movement, AKP and Gülen have successfully negotiated the boundaries between religion and politics to make more space for faith-based lives under secular conditions. Importantly, these multi-dimensional negotiations led these Islamic actors to separate religion from other spheres of life, such as education and political authority. Put differently, Islamic actors in Turkey are no longer contesting over either Islamic or secular state, but mainly over ways of life that are religiously conservative or liberal.

Although a large variety of actors negotiate the terms of democracy in Turkey, this has been obscured mainly by two misconceptions. First, Islamic actors have been mistakenly praised as “liberal democrats” as they have come to the forefront of political reform. Second, the symbiotic association of the Kemalist elite, the secularist followers of Ataturk, and Islamic actors have become increasingly anti-democratic and pro-military, and alienated the democratic left, it has become a home for hardcore Kemalists only.

The Kemalist-led backlash

The controversy surrounding the presidential nomination of Abdullah Gül incited a vocal secularist backlash. Kemalists, mostly women, who played pioneer roles in Kemalist civil society organizations, led this backlash in the three largest cities, Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara.1 Although exceptions apply, the Kemalist elite typically comes mostly from privileged family and socio-economic background, which has been concurrent with the Kemalist leadership, hundreds of thousands of people (1.5 million estimated in Izmir only) poured to the streets opposing a wide variety of issues including the rapid rise of AKP’s popularity and power.

In my interviews, Kemalist leaders made radical statements expressing alienation from the idea of democracy, such as: “We do not want democracy anymore, as it is used and abused by the Islamists.” Today’s Kemalists, unlike their hero Ataturk, are more and more estranged from the West, as the EU largely supports AKP’s reform packages. One of the leaders of the protests stated: “The West and the EU do not understand the sacred meaning of the military for the Turkish society. In our country, there is no difference between an NGO and the military, each of which come to rescue us from political or natural disasters such as Sharia or earthquake.” A considerable majority of Kemalists supports the military’s domination in politics. Despite the vocal secularist backlash, not only did Gül become the president in a few months, but also the backlash faded immediately after the parliamentary elections. Why did the backlash lose its remarkable momentum? Typical of social outbursts, the secularist backlash exploded as an abrupt and emotionally charged response to events. This emotional energy is not enough to constitute a durable social movement that can engage with the state. More importantly, the symbiotic relationship between the Kemalist elite and the secular state has prevented the former from growing as a social group with agendas that are separate from the Republic. Differently put, the Kemalists’ claim of a monopoly of the Republic has undermined their own autonomy as independent social actors. Ironically, although Kemalists claimed to be the guardians of the transition from authoritarian rule, the Kemalist leadership, hundreds of thousands of people (1.5 million estimated in Izmir only) poured to the streets opposing a wide variety of issues including the rapid rise of AKP’s popularity and power.

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of secular democracy, they lack the basic experience of citizenry to
dispute with the state and to push for their own agendas by using
democratic channels. Whether they are state officials or members of
Civil society, Kemalists of the new millennium need to come to terms
with the separate and autonomous sphere of the state and society.
This is the first step toward the politics of engagement that the Is-
lamic actors in Turkey have mastered.

**Ordinary citizens**

The majority of Turkish citizens do not associate with either
Kemalist or Islamic actors. Hence, they do not mobilize or organize
collectively with any of these groups. Their refusal to base their lives on
faith and religious conservatism separates them from Islamic actors.
Although they are discontent with political Islam, they also do not ally
with Kemalists and their authoritarian laicism. Both of these polarized
groups fall short of satisfying different needs of secular Turkish citizens
for individual freedoms.

The worst impact of the inefficient outbursts of the Kemalist elite is
the fact that they overshadow the voice and presence of a diverse and
popular secular resistance to political Islam. Unlike the Kemalist leader-
ship and spokespeople, secular crowds in the 2007 protests crosscut the
lines of class, social status, gender, age, occupation, and even political
orientation. The rich, the middle class, and the poor walked together to
protest AKP. Unlike the old-school Kemalist elite, the participating secu-
lar people were from every age group, including the youth. Most impor-
tantly, this was the first public demonstration in which a large spectrum
of the secular and the faithful—including some Muslims with head-
scarf—joined forces against political Islam. Considering the close ties
between the pious president Gül and the AKP government, the secular
masses expressed fear of losing the separation of powers between gov-
ernment, presidency, and parliament. Briefly, the protestors exercised
“democracy in everyday life,” while the Kemalist leadership explicitly de-
nounced democratic reforms under an Islamic party’s leadership.

Democratic outcomes require fair and genuine competition, but there
seems to be none for AKP at the moment. In an informal dinner party
in Istanbul, I had the chance to meet and chat with Abdullah Gül. I was
very surprised to see how calm and confident he remained in the mid-
dle of the turbulence, which was mainly about his presidency. He told
me: “The reform process has started. We will not be stopped.” Gül’s se-
renity was largely due to the inefficient opposition politics by Kemalists
and CHP.

**AKP and liberal democrats**

The successive victories of AKP have come with increasing religious
conservatism in everyday life as a package deal. As many restaurants
stopped serving alcohol, secular Turks from every walk of life stood up for
their rights to consume alcohol wherever they wish. Not just the Kemal-
ists but secular groups at large express discomfort by the rise of religious
conservatism in daily life. Especially at the neighbourhood level, the
tensions between religious conservatism and the needs of the secular
citizens increase rapidly. In certain neighbourhods and cities, women
who are dressed revealingly complain increasingly about judgmental
looks. More and more people express discomfort about being refused to
be served food during Ramadan and being judged by the pious when
they eat in public. Pious leaders, such as Gül, do serve alcohol both in
private and official events to display their cooperation and compromise.
However, democratic ends cannot be trusted to the goodwill of political
leaders.

The fact that Islamic actors in Turkey undertake political reform does not
render them “liberal democrats.” The term must be strictly reserved
for social actors who unconditionally defend the rights and freedom of
others and not just themselves. Probably aware of this distinction, AKP
recruited a considerable number of genuine democrats who were previ-
ously active in the secular left. It is also significant that the Socialist Inter-
national has approached AKP, but not CHP, for membership. The reason
that democrats temporarily cooperate with AKP is that it is the only party
that undertakes political reform in Turkey. But it would be a clear oddity
to assign the role of a liberal democrat to Islamic actors, who tried to
criminalize adultery, and who do not even claim to be liberal outside the
economic realm.

In contrast to the liberal democrats, AKP yearns for democratization
mainly because a more democratic state will emancipate and em-
power Islamic actors by tolerating their own faith-based life. Similar
to the founding fathers’ reforms as part of their broader state-build-
ing project, AKP’s reforms are supplementary parts of their broader
scheme of political reform. For example, AKP passes bills of reform for
women and ethnic and religious minorities. But its attitudes in general
contradict with these bills, as the party has undermined the Islamic
feminism that had flourished under the previous Islamic party, Refah.
Instead, AKP recruited conservative women into the party, who do not
account to the women’s movement but to the Prime Minister Erdoğan.
This paradox has also been evident in AKP’s ambiguous relations with
religious minorities, such as the alienated Alevis or AKP’s absence in the
mourning of Hrant Dink, the Armenian democrat assassinated due to
his liberal politics.

While liberal democrats support AKP for respect of individual and
religious freedoms, Islamic actors have conservative takes on ways of
life, sex, homosexuality, and gender relations. A strong opposition to
the highly skilled AKP mobilization has to be assertive about individu-
al freedoms. The lift of the headscarf ban from the universities in 2006
is the first step for a liberal democracy only if the freedoms of
others, such as religious minorities are institutionally protected. Rather
than attacking the pious and their faith-based life, an efficient secular
opposition needs to recognize, respect, and contest with Islamic actors
over individual freedoms by using democratic channels. However, un-
like Islamic actors, ordinary secular citizens have not yet articulated their
future agendas, discontent, needs and interests. The lack of a political
language of ordinary citizens explains why some vote for AKP, and others
bellow selectively from Kemalist laicism. Yet, this is simply an act of lazi-
ness on their part. One thing is clear. Neither CHP nor the Kemalist elite
can lead or shelter a lasting and proactive (as opposed to reactionary)
secular resistance movement. The secular crowds need to come up with
new recipes if they wish to surpass the old-style Kemalist menu that is
losing its appeal along with democratization in Turkey.

**Notes**

1. Berna Turam, Between Islam and the State: The Politics of Engagement (Stanford
   University Press, 2007).
   18, no. 1 (2007).
3. Berna Turan, “Turkish Women Divided by Politics: Secularist Activism versus Islamic

Berna Turan is Associate Professor of Sociology and Middle
Eastern Studies at Hampshire College.
Email: bтурan@hampshire.edu

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