

# DOES TURKISH MODEL OF DEMOCRACY LACK EMPIRICAL VALIDITY IN THE ARAB WORLD? A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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## ABSTRACT

*A larger section of scholars in the Arab world and West have been acknowledging Turkey as an effective model of democracy for the emerging democracies after Arab spring due to its ability to maintain balance between Islam and democracy. But, this paper explores how Turkish model of democracy does not fit into the Arab world. The study will also highlight the weaknesses of the Turkish model and offer a new perspective. The civil-military engagement and the dominance of the concept of secularism over Islam that characterizes modern Turkey cannot be simply implemented in Arab countries. The study will also examine various socio-economic, cultural and political differences between Turkey and the Arab world and explore the non-viability of the full application of the Turkish model in the Arab region. Turkey has always benefitted from a diversified economy, a lengthy track record of solid economic management and structural reform, geographical proximity to Europe, integration with European markets, and the effect of its associate membership in the European Union (EU) which more or less, help Turkey maintain democratic pattern of governance and weather the factors that create instability on communitarian identities.*

**Keywords:** Arab world, Islam, Secularism, Turkish model.

## INTRODUCTION

Following the Arab spring, scholars, academicians, political scientists and political leaders from the Arab countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya are making a beeline to offer to the West various prescription about the future course of their action in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). After the Arab spring, these countries have been looking ahead for their democratization process so as to eradicate the authoritarian regimes of past. In order to usher in democratization process in the Arab countries, there has been much debate about what kind of democracy could be the best example considering the particularized historicity and socio-political dimension existing in the Arab world. In this context, Turkey has been acknowledged as a potential model for the Arab world democracies due to its ability to establish a fine balance between Islam and democracy, apart from other significant thing. Therefore, the democratic pattern of Turkey could be seen as an ideal democracy and a new word, *Turkish Model*, could find a place in dictionary of political science. The debate upon the importance of "Turkish Model" spread like the panacea for all ills in the Arab world when the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) conducted a survey on political attitudes in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iraq. More than 65 percent of respondents in the survey said they felt Turkey could be a model for the region, because of its perceived mix of Muslim piety, democratic system of government and economic success achieved under the government of the religiously conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP).<sup>1</sup>

Before assessing the viability of Turkish model for the Arab world, it is indispensable to examine Turkish model

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from various perspective. Turkey has been experiencing democratic government since 1923, but it came out as successful Muslim democracy among the Muslim nations only after the arrival of the new regime of Justice & Development Party (AKP) in the last few decades. Although, the democracy in Turkey itself witnessed a number of changes since it became a republican country, it is a fact that prior to Arab spring, not much academic attention was paid on Turkish democracy and its characteristics. Whether this model fits into the Arab world at all or it requires a unique mould of democracy, can be explored only after understanding the much-touted Turkish model and its feature as well as the different socio-political condition of the Arab.

## **TURKISH MODEL**

This term originated in connection with the Arab Spring . Arab Spring itself is a pejorative term used to describe the accelerated political changes in various Arab states such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya that had overthrown dictators in 2011 and begun building new political and economic systems. Turkish model refers to the focus on Republic of *Turkey as "an example of a modern, moderate Muslim state."* It has been seen as combining a secular state and constitution, with a government run by a political party or political parties (For instance Justice and Development Party, AKP) with "roots in political Islam". The AKP, led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has ruled Turkey with a large majority in parliament since 2002. During this period, Turkey cultivated good relations with the West, but also cordial ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran and a more pro-Palestinian policy. It has vigorously conducted, "substantially free and fair" elections, a vibrant culture, and has undergone an economic boom, developing a "large and growing middle class." In sum, four main factors have been identified as central to the Turkish model and its appeal in the Arab region: i) successful balancing of Islam and democracy in a secular political context; ii) economic growth and development; iii) bringing the military under government control; and iv) regional influence, including championing such causes as Palestinian rights and statehood.

However, many scholars and political leaders have expressed reservations about the viability of the Turkish model for the emerging Arab democracies, particularly with regards to the differing historical experiences, the role of Islam, and Turkish perceptions of secularism when compared with the Arab countries.<sup>5</sup>

## **TURKISH MODEL LACKS EMPIRICAL VALIDITY IN THE ARAB WORLD!**

The entire Arab world has been victim of the overall inefficiency of the governments, high rates of unemployment and underemployment, mass poverty, authoritarianism, and lack of democracy. The well-educated young masses have developed high level of frustration as a result of stagnancy and inefficiency of the regimes whose only purpose was to maintain the status-quo. Therefore, there has begun a search for democratization process where these factors could be sorted out through new government. In this process, the idea of Turkey being a model for the Middle East and North Africa is surely disputable on many grounds as it has many flaws. More interestingly, Turkey does not project itself as a model for anyone. President Abdullah Gül, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other Justice and Development Party (AK Party) officials have said this on many occasions.

There has always been a gap between the expectation of the Arab countries in terms of their governance model and existing Turkish model of democracy. The thrust for better governance, combating corruption, establishing institutions of democracy, free and fair elections and better economic policies has been moving round the Arab countries after the Arab spring. Therefore, the suitability and feasibility of Turkish democracy with Arab countries could be assessed on following ground: secularism, democracy and religiosity.

## **SECULARISM, DEMOCRACY, AND POLITICAL ISLAM**

The most important justifications for presenting Turkey as a model are its democratic system and successful experimentation with the compatibility of Islam and popular democracy. These justifications, however, fail to convey several supporting pillars that have been equally instrumental in shaping modern day Turkey.

Turkey is one of the few states in the Muslim world that has openly embraced and strictly enforced the principle of secularism. Yet secularism alone would not have been enough to enable the Turkish model to gain grip throughout the Arab world; on the contrary, many cite Turkey's secularism as an impediment to the acceptance of the Turkish model in the Middle East. Rather, the feature that makes Turkey attractive throughout the region is the fact that it is a predominately Islamic yet secular country that has successfully accommodated the rise of political Islam. In other words, the "Turkish model" is really about the accumulation of Islamist political power in a formally secular and democratic setting.<sup>6</sup>

It is also important to highlight that Turkey differs from much of the Muslim world, and the MENA region in particular, with regard to the appeal of Islamism. Since the 1980s, most Muslim governments, including those of South East Asia,

South Asia, and the Middle East have Islamized policies or appropriated Islamic symbols and values to improve their legitimacy and counter the appeal of Islamic opposition.<sup>7</sup> The most significant exception is Turkey, whose leaders have never been pressured to Islamize policies or appeal to Islam.<sup>8</sup> This could well be due to the restraint the secular regime has imposed on Islamists in Turkey, but an equally likely explanation is that the Turkish population has not expressed significant demand for Islamic policies or law.

### **ANTI- SECULAR PROVISIONS IN THE TURKISH CONSTITUTION**

There are two provisions in the Turkish Constitution which are inconsistent with the principles of secularism. The first one revolves around the existence of the Department of Religious Affairs. Article 136 of the 1982 Constitution establishes a Department of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İsleri Başkanlığı*) within the general administration. The employees of the Department are civil servants, and its funds are appropriated from the administration's budget. The Department is responsible for the regulation of the religious life of all Muslims living within the country. Among other things, the Department of Religious Affairs appoints religious officials, including imams, pays the stipends of religious officials, and directs the administration of more than 70,000 mosques.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, there is also controversial provision under Article 24 of the Turkish Constitution about mandatory religious education. It means education and instruction in religion and ethics shall be conducted under Turkish state supervision and control. Instruction in religious culture and moral education shall be compulsory in the curricular of primary and secondary schools (*Turkish Constitution of 1982, Article 24*). Mandatory religious education undermines the principle of "equality of opportunities" because the children of citizens who do not consider themselves to be Sunni Muslims are forced to take courses based on this specific interpretation of Islam which seems to be both illiberal and incompatible with democracy.

### **ISSUE OF HEADSCARF BAN**

The wearing of the Islamic headscarf at Turkish universities is a relatively recent phenomenon, which started in the 1980s and subsequently led to the adoption of various regulations and legislation related to the issue (*Wing & Varol, 2005, p. 36*). The Cabinet issued the first regulation addressing the wearing of Islamic headscarves in universities in 1981. On the other hand, a plethora of legal regulations have been adopted, some banning the headscarf, others lifting the ban. Over the course of time, this issue has become a central point of concern within the debate of secularism and its role in Turkey. Some find the ban on headscarves to be incompatible with secularism while others would disagree.<sup>10</sup>

### **CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONSHIP**

Apart from other things, civil-military relationship has also contributed significantly in sustaining democratic regime in Turkey. There exists harmonious and cordial relationship between civil and military. Since the 1930s, the military has appointed itself as the guardian of the basic principles of the regime. As a result, the military's influence over Turkey's politics has extended beyond national defence and security issues; it has been shaped by the ethics of guardianship. It has launched four military coups and removed four civilian governments since the Republic's establishment. Two of these coup happened as a result of the direct military intervention in 1960 and 1980, while a third was carried out in 1971 by memorandum. Finally, in 1997, Prime Minister Erbakan from the pro-Islamist Welfare Party was pressured by the military into stepping down.<sup>11</sup> Still, the military has enjoyed a high degree of popular respect as these military heads have never shown interests in continuation of the military regimes. The army regime returned back to their barrack after the civilian government assumed charges. These kind of relationship cannot be traced in the Arab regime particularly, Egypt. Hence, Turkish model of democracy could not find much support in the Arab regime.

### **MARKET STATE RELATION**

The second pillar of the Turkish model lies at the Turkish Islamists government's special connection with the economy and market. Turkish Islamists have a market-oriented approach where economic successes and gains, not pure ideology, are the main driving forces. The liberal spaces created by Turgut Özal's reforms paved the way for the emergence of this type of market-based Turkish Islamism which is lacking in the Arab world.<sup>12</sup> The crucial decision of the Turgut Ozal government to integrate Turkish economy with the global economy also had a disciplining effect on political governance. As a capital-scarce country, Turkey's growth depends heavily on the availability of foreign capital. Therefore, the cost of populist policies that divert capital flows increased considerably. This was especially true after the 2001 crisis, when Turkey began to attract ever-larger flows of international finance. Populist policies would have made Turkey less attractive as a destination for portfolio and direct investments, undermining economic growth. In short, when

Turkey fully embraced globalization, it also embraced globalization's inherent discipline, thus consolidating governance reforms and strengthening the separation of political and economic powers.

### **LINKAGES TO THE WEST**

The establishment of Turkish democracy was more or less the result of westernization approach and the efforts made by Ataturk towards modernization. Ataturk had taken route to western ideology of liberty, equality, freedom in his quest for modernizing Turkey. Hence, Turkey did not find any kind of difficulty or resistance at mass level against such kind of ideologies and values. Although Turkey fought its national war for independence against the imperial powers of the West, Turkish nationalism did not come into being as an anti-Western ideology. In this respect, Turkish nationalism is much different than the brand of Arab nationalism identified with Gamal Abdel Nasser, which was clearly and more virulently anti-imperialist and anti-Western.

On the contrary, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's way forward for Turkey was to build a solid relationship with the West. He spoke of the need to boost Turkey into the league of the most "civilized" nations. His means for meeting this challenge was modernization by way of Westernization. The drive to Westernize had a national identity component. The aim was to create a society based on what were then still perceived to be Western values: secularism, democracy, and gender equality. Also, there was a foreign policy component to this project. The best way to boost Turkey's modernization efforts was to gain membership in the West.<sup>13</sup>

### **STATE TRADITION AND PROFESSIONAL BUREAUCRACY**

With the existence of the Turkish republic since 1923, democratic procedures and its mechanisms have been maintained effectively through professional bureaucracy. The bureaucracy has strengthened the foundation stones of Turkish democracy and state tradition. Therefore, all the state institutions and machineries of Government played vital role in checking and balancing system of democracy. Turkish democratic government being a unitary government has maintained the integrity and internal security in appropriate order. The concept of decentralization in Turkish democracy has existed only in terms of administrative convenience and in order to provide the basic services to the common people. This kind of governance proved fruitful in sustaining the top-bottom approach of democracy. After all, it can be urged that Arab world has long way to go while replacing autocratic regimes into Turkish model democracy.

### **ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETIES AND DEMOCRACY**

Democracy of every nation requires proper checks and balances mechanism, and it is largely possible through civil society only that citizens protect their rights as individuals, force policy makers to accommodate their interests, and limit abuse of state authority. Civil society also promotes a culture of bargaining and provides future leaders with the skills to articulate ideas, form coalitions and govern. The preconditions for democracy are lacking in the Arab world partly because Hosni Mubarak and other Arab dictators spent the past half-century emasculating the news media, suppressing intellectual inquiry, restricting artistic expression, banning political parties, and co-opting regional, ethnic and religious organizations to silence dissenting voices. But the handicaps of Arab civil society also have historical causes that transcend the policies of modern rulers. Until the establishment of colonial regimes in the late 19th century, Arab societies were ruled under *Shariah* law, which essentially precludes autonomous and self governing private organizations. Thus, while Western Europe was making its tortuous transition from arbitrary rule by monarchs to democratic rule of law, the Middle East retained authoritarian political structures. Such a political environment prevented democratic institutions from taking root and ultimately facilitated the rise of modern Arab dictatorships.<sup>14</sup>

### **CONCLUSION**

The debate upon application of Turkish model of democracy into Arab region after the Arab Spring is not a new phenomenon. This has earlier resonance in Muslim world especially Central Asian region which looked at the Turkish model after the collapse of USSR. Arab world lack in practical orientation to adopt Turkish model of democracy. Still, Turkish modernization experience is important for the region and much more applicable than the Western modernization or the Iranian model of theocratic state. It has been argued that in light of the demands and needs of the Arab revolutionaries who helped overthrow the authoritarian regimes and still supervise the political situation from the streets, the Turkish model offers valuable lessons in terms of transition to market economy, integration into the global market, rapid economic growth to overtake the population growth and reduce unemployment, efficient governance and accountable government and most importantly the re-organization of the relations between political Islam, secular parties and citizens and the military in the post-Arab spring.<sup>15</sup>

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