



Reports

Reading and Misreading the Success of the AKP Turkish Influence on Arab Islamist Movements

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23 October 2016

This article is a condensed translation of a report first publish in Arabic.(1)



Turkey's Prime Minister and leader of ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) Tayyip Erdogan and Egypt's former President Mohamed Mursi greet the audience during AK Party congress in Ankara September 30, 2012. [Reuters]

Abstract

In recent years, Sunni Islamist movements across the Arab world have looked to emulate Turkey's model of governance under the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Some of these movements have attempted to reproduce the Turkish model, ignoring critical issues such as the disparity between the gradual evolution of the AKP versus the sudden jolt of change brought about by the uprisings of the Arab Spring.

This paper reviews the influence of the Turkish experience on Arab Islamist movements at the conceptual, intellectual, and organizational/procedural levels. Looking at the countries of the Arab Spring, the paper examines the successes and failures resulting from emulating the Turkish experience and the likely impact on the future of these movements.

Introduction

Led by former Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, a large number of young members of the Turkish Virtue party—labelled Milliyetçi Görüş (National Viewpoint)—established the AKP in August 2001. Arab Islamist movements, the Muslim Brotherhood group in particular, received the AKP's emergence with a great deal of uncertainty and alarm. Many Islamists interpreted the AKP's formation as a secession from the "Islamic Movement" because of Erbakan's special links to that movement. Furthermore, the new party remained adamant in parting from Erbakan, even accusing his party of collaborating with the West and Israel.

But the confidence gap between the AKP and the Brotherhood was rapidly bridged, motivated by political developments in Turkey and the Arab world. The electoral success of the AKP, coupled with its Islamist policies, drew widespread regional admiration. At the same time, the AKP provided support to Arab Islamist opposition movements. This support continued through to the uprisings of the Arab Spring, an important factor that built close ties between the AKP and Arab Islamist movements.

Since 2011, Turkey has played an important role in the region vis-à-vis the Arab Spring revolutions and has provided a safe haven for Islamist leaders who were forced out by counter-revolutionary powers. Accordingly, Turkey has been able to exert political influence on the movements' decision-making and policies. But the greatest influence exerted by the AKP was its ability to set a "model" for these movements, showcasing itself as a conservative party that succeeded in ruling a country as large as Turkey, while successfully integrating its conservative Islamist background with democracy.

Though the AKP has influenced parties and thinkers across the Islamic world, this paper will highlight its impact on Sunni Islamist movements, particularly the so-called "political Islam" movements. This is because these movements have been deeply affected by the AKP and have been more prominent in the revolutionary scene.

Background

For most of its history, modern movements in political Islam have been largely concerned with top issues such as Islamization of the state, Islamic governance, and the adoption of sharia law. These concerns were reflected in the names of Islamist parties, such as Jabhat al-A'mal al-Islami (Islamic Action Front) in Jordan or the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria. After the 1990s, these movements altered their approach and political posture in parallel with a number of regional and international developments.

Several factors contributed to the emergence of the AKP's influence. One noteworthy strategy of the AKP was to project an Islamic worldview while officially maintaining an identity as a democratic conservative party.

The Turkish model prompted large scale intellectual reforms by Arab Islamist movements, particularly in Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco. These movements underwent deep reevaluations of contentious concepts such as democracy, secularism, citizenship, and the relationship between mosque and state.

After years of tepidly accepting democracy while raising reservations over its philosophical underpinnings, the Arab Islamist movements, particularly those linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, began to put forward an approach that adopted operational democracy by classifying it as an advantageous political ideology that has no contradiction with Islamic shura (consultation).

Citizenship and equality between all people in rights and duties has been restated by Islamist movements, with notable exceptions such as prohibiting women and non-Muslims from assuming presidential portfolios. The leader of Tunisia's Nahda Party, Rashid Ghannouchi, has even endorsed full citizenship rights for all, including non-believers and women.

Influenced by the Turkish model, many Arab Islamist movements conceded to exercising political activity under the state umbrella by renouncing their call for transnational sharia rule. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, many parties renounced secretive political work and established open political parties. The Tunisian Nahda Party took one step further, officially moving from the platform of "political Islam" to "democratic Islamism". Such a shift can be viewed as a modified version of "conservative democracy" pioneered by the AKP.

The Moroccan Justice and Development party has called for a civil state guided by Islamic principles that would be governed by the law enacted by an authorized (elected) body.

By softening its religious approach and embracing a political style that accommodates the cultural norms of the wider society, the AKP was largely able to deflate domestic and external pressure over its Islamist orientation. Other Arab Islamist movements have done the same when they embraced aspects of globalization, modernism, and democracy, without invoking the language of religious verses.

The intellectual and conceptual reevaluations have impacted the political behavior of these Islamist movements, particularly in the post-revolution era. These developments have been marked by collision between idealistic perceptions and the pragmatism of politics and governance within a civil state.

Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan was himself a major influence on Arab Islamists as evinced by election campaigns across the Arab world. Erdogan is often depicted as a

shining symbol of Turkish political development, to the point of that a number of Egyptian presidential candidates branded themselves as "Egypt's Erdogan".

The relation between mosque and state

One of the key factors that led to AKP's success was a "non-conformist" message that addressed all Turkish citizens while focusing on economic development objectives. Conversely, the Arab Islamists' approach had appeared entirely weak and regressive, prompting them to change their "umma" (religious community) approach to a "country" approach. The call for Islamist identity has been sidelined in favor of the trend that calls for separation between da'wah (proselytizing) and politics. A call for abandoning religious slogans during election campaigns is also a topic of frequent discussion.

The AKP's success in gradually neutralizing the Turkish military in country's political scene has become a model that Arab Islamists seek to emulate. This was particularly the case in Egypt.

At the level of political work, the Tunisian Nahda Party has shown Turkish influence as it made tactical concessions for achieving strategic objectives. This was seen when the party staged the country's first secular-Islamist reconciliation process.

Misreading the Turkish model's success

Attempts by some Arab Islamists to evaluate and emulate the Turkish model, however, have been marked with inconsistency, shallowness, and gross selectivity on how to benefit from the Turkish experience.

The first erroneous approach involves the nature of the AKP, which is viewed by many Arab Islamist movements as a purely "Islamist movement". This perception has caused several instances of embarrassment for Arab Islamists who view the AKP's success in narrowly religious terms, and ignore the complex factors behind the group's achievements.

Many Arab Islamist theorists have noted the clear variations between Arab movements and the AKP with respect to foreign policy that Turkey has been "forced to follow" vis-à-vis the West and Israel. Though they were not obliged to do the same, some Islamists have nevertheless failed to avoid embarrassment because of some of their deliberate mistakes in this respect.

Secularism in Turkey is one of the six pillars of the Turkish republic, the defiance of which is viewed as a breach to the Turkish constitution. Despite being greatly diminished in recent years, the secular pillar represents a clear distinction from the Arab Islamists who would never accept secularism, even when advocated by Erdogan.

Another error involves ignoring the major variations between the realities in the Arab world and Turkey. The abrupt revolutionary process in the Arab countries runs contrary to the "gradual reform" approach adopted by the leaders of the AKP. The party has been able to gradually neutralize the Turkish military from the country's politics. The party justified its policy by the need to comply with the European Union standards. Meanwhile, after assuming power, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood group rushed in its hasty attempt to follow in Turkey's footsteps, heedless of the powerful influence in Egypt of a deeply-embedded military dominance.

Some Arab Islamists have failed to distinguish the major differences between the process of political work in Turkey under a semi-stable environment, and the volatile and transitional nature of post-revolution circumstances.

Future influence

Arab Islamist movements stand at a junction in their intellectual and political progress as they face challenges posed by counter-revolutionary powers and other domestic problems. Calls by young Islamists for reevaluations of strategies and accountability for failed leadership have also posed a challenge. Arab Islamists have exhibited their lack of a clear vision for a modern state and how it should be run, prompting many young members to disengage from these movements.

Many are beginning to look to an earlier moment, when the AKP broke away from failed leaders and established a new project. Yet, the idea has yet to be developed into a sound political strategy. Instead, young Arab Islamists seem to still embrace the goal of finding an iconic leader, motivated by Erdogan's ability to withstand the recent military coup.

If Islamist movements indeed conduct serious intellectual reevaluations, as they claim, the Turkish model would cast a deep influence on these reevaluations. In this context, views that confine the state's role to ensuring rights and liberties, without imposing specific culture or identity, would be further consolidated. The call for separating da'wah

activity from political work, redefining Islamism, and resetting priorities over Islamization and secularism, would further be strengthened.

Possible expectations also involve embracing democracy by Islamist movements, not only as a tool for governance, but also as a pro-Islamic means for supporting positive, democratic change in the region.

In the view of many Arab Islamists, the failed coup attempt in Turkey has strengthened the appeal of the Turkish model. These movements, however, have to do some remodeling that would suit the Arab vision of an “Islamic party”.

The Turkish government’s successful suppression of the coup has shown a model that is durable against military power, something that is very attractive to Islamists in Egypt, despite the huge differences between the two cases.

Conclusion

Many factors will contribute to the future shape of Arab Islamist movements, but the model of the Turkish Justice and Development Party will loom large. Moreover, the fact that many exiled Arab Islamist leaders currently reside in Turkey will likely have a lasting impact.

Reflecting on the AKP’s experience, Tunisia’s al-Nahda Party and the Justice and Development Party in Morocco will likely carry out further intellectual reevaluations within the relatively stable political environment of these two countries.

Meanwhile, in Egypt the Turkish influence will likely push the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood towards further reevaluations and less violence in their political struggle. As regards Islamist movements in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, their future progress can only be assessed after stability is restored in these countries.

In this regard, emphasis should be put on viewing the AKP’s progress as sustainable and its success rooted in its ability to evolve—rather than viewing it as a rigid model. Thus, movements should look to the AKP for inspiration, rather than for a model to copy. In this regard, further study is needed to help advance the discussion of religion and politics and the transition from da’wah to pragmatism and state-building. Eventually, political circumstances in the Arab world will change and Islamists must be ready to face these challenges.

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(1) The full report in Arabic is available at <http://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2016/09/160921094144594.html>

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