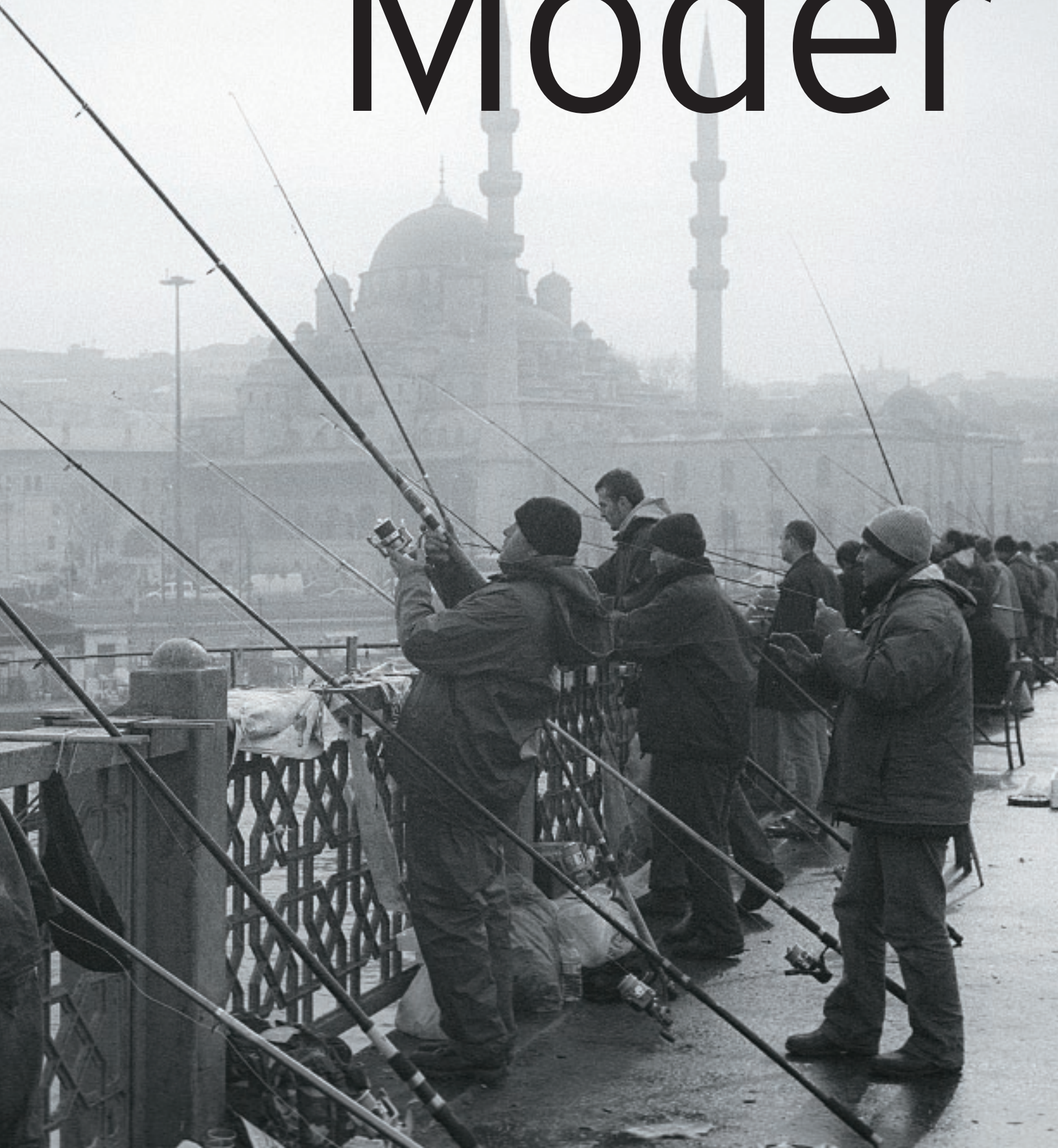


# 'Moder



# ate Islam' in Turkey

By Svante E. Cornell

**W**ith its proximity to Europe and long interaction with European powers, Turkey has occupied a unique place among Muslim-majority countries. For half a century after the foundation of the Turkish republic in 1923, it served as a showcase of Western-style secularization and was often touted as a “model” for other regional states. Turkey joined NATO in 1952 and later sought entry into the European Union.

But from the 1970s onward, Turkey has been affected by the same wave of political Islam that spread across the rest of the Muslim world. In 2002, for the first time, an Islamic conservative political party gained sole power in a landmark election. In power ever since, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been embraced as a showcase of “moderate Islam.”

Turkey has clearly transformed since the AKP's election. But observers differ on the nature of the country's transformation. Many credit moderate Islam in Turkey with dismantling the rigid statism of the country's past and laud the AKP for bringing the country closer to the European Union and democratic standards. Yet, as the AKP's critics argue, reality is considerably more complex. In fact, it is by no means clear that the alternative to secular statism will be liberal democracy.

While the AKP's accomplishments are undeniable, particularly during its

first term, is Turkey becoming more or less liberal on the party's watch? The question is crucial because it goes a long way toward determining the promise of moderate Islam as a democratic force in the broader Muslim world.

#### Emergence of the AKP

The AKP is the result of political Islam's gradual adaptation to Turkish political realities. The fact that the most successful and moderate Islamic political party emerged in Turkey is no accident—the Turkish state provided a reasonably liberal framework for political mobilization, but one that was clearly delimited by a strong state. Turkey is neither permissive, anything-goes Pakistan, where religious parties have regularly crossed the line into inciting violence and hatred, nor the repressive Egyptian system, which has generated an Islamist backlash. Political Islam gradually moderated and grew at the expense of increasingly discredited political elites.

By 1994, the Islamist Welfare Party won control of numerous municipalities, including Ankara and Istanbul, and gained power in a short-lived coalition a year later. Welfare was governed by a core of orthodox Islamists but won a broader following by gathering the votes of a dismayed socially conservative center-right electorate. Welfare's leader, Necmettin Erbakan, is remembered for his calls to introduce Shariah (Islamic law), a foreign policy that sought to distance Turkey from the “imperialist” West and his rhetorical remark that the party would come to power either “with or without bloodshed.” The Welfare mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who often referred to himself as “the imam of Istanbul,” in 1995 likened democracy to a streetcar: “When you come to your stop, you get off.”

The Turkish state predictably moved in against Welfare in 1997, as the military and judiciary engineered the collapse of Erbakan's coalition. The party was eventually closed down by the Constitutional Court, Erbakan was banned from politics, and Erdogan even served a few months in jail on charges of inciting religious hatred.

This formative experience led to the creation of the AKP. An apparently reformed Erdogan, together with a group of “renewers,” split off in 2001 to form the AKP. These reformists had concluded that they could only come to power and hold on to it by moderating their rhetoric and by appealing to the

center. They realized that Turkey's state institutions were too strong to be overtaken: Only an external force such as the European Union could weaken the state and thereby enable political Islam to ensconce itself in power. Hence, the AKP turned its predecessor's logic on its head and embraced Turkey's EU membership aspirations. The rhetoric of moderation worked: The AKP swept to power the next year.

### A Moderate Profile

The AKP largely lived up to its moderate profile during its first term in office, from 2002 to 2007. It implemented some of the most thorough economic and political reforms in Turkey's history, bringing in an extended period of growth, it broadened minority rights, and it allowed Turkey to begin negotiations for membership in the European Union. No one can take these accomplishments away from the AKP. For the first time, its reforms made Turkey a realistic candidate for EU membership.

The AKP also seemed to disprove accusations of a hidden agenda. Hardly

Sezer's presidency, suggesting a substantial patience and political maturity.

The AKP's reformist zeal gradually expired, as did its warm feelings toward Europe. A major reason was the increasingly anti-Turkish rhetoric coming from major European leaders—especially German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Europe's double standards toward Turkey—now overtly based on its Muslim religion—strengthened the politics of Muslim identification.

But another factor was the shattering of the AKP's hopes to use Europe to weaken Turkish secularism. Many AKP members interviewed by this author point to a case in the European Court of Human Rights in 2005, which to the AKP's dismay upheld the Turkish ban on Islamic headscarves in universities. The AKP leaders concluded that Europe was not a consistent proxy in their efforts to weaken the secular state.

### Second Term: Back to Roots

The AKP's second term has been very different from its first, characterized by backtracking in a number of areas. Significantly, this coincides with the party's capturing of the presidency in 2007. In spite of secularist attempts to the contrary (supported by the military), the AKP managed to install its foreign minister, Abdullah Gül, in the presidential palace at Çankaya. Dominating the political landscape, the AKP grew much more unilateralist. Three areas are worthy of specific attention. These

way it reshuffles the bureaucracy. As a result, the incentive structure in the Turkish bureaucracy has been turned on its head. Career advancement a decade ago might have required a secular lifestyle, but now conformance with Islamic dress codes and lifestyles is key. People lose jobs or promotions and fail to secure employment if, for example, their wives do not wear a headscarf. Piousness rather than merit is becoming the main criterion for advancement.

While most attention to the issue has focused on the bureaucracy's Islamization, the real problem might be its implications for democratic governance. When loyalty to the ruling party's ideology determines advancement, that undermines the bureaucracy's neutrality and, therefore, democracy. This raises the question of whether the AKP is actually bent on reforming and liberalizing an omnipotent semi-authoritarian state—the assumption of most Western Turkey-watchers—or if it seeks to employ state power to further its own ideological agenda. As an AKP deputy chairman stated, the AKP “aspires to rule the state”—taking over rather than overhauling a state-society relationship where the state sets the rules for society.

Since 2007, the judiciary has become a major frontline in the Turkish power struggle. The secularist state prosecutor in 2008 applied to the Constitutional Court to close down the AKP, accusing it of undermining state secularism. The court found the AKP guilty on the merits; but in an exercise of judicial balancing, it cut the party's state funding rather than closing it down. While parts of the judiciary remain controlled by the Republican establishment, a growing portion is loyal to the AKP; this is apparent from a large-scale investigation into alleged coup-plotters, known as the Ergenekon case. The investigation was initially greeted as a Turkish version of Italy's “clean hands” (*mani pulite*) investigation in the 1990s—an opportunity to finally rid Turkey of the web of shady connections between the state, organized crime and death squadrons used against suspected terrorists. But although the investigation has revealed evidence of wrongdoing on the part of some of the suspects, and might have

any antiseccular laws were passed or even proposed. But the AKP governed under the watchful eye of the staunchly secularist president, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, who made no bones about his veto power over both legislation and high-level bureaucratic appointments; there was no point in advancing Islamic causes that would be doomed to fail. Yet the AKP endured over four years of

relate to the staffing of the government bureaucracy, the growing politicization of the judiciary to serve the interests of the ruling party and media freedoms.

Turks have a word for the practice of appointing like-minded individuals to government jobs: *kadrolasma* or “cadrelization.” While the practice is not new, the AKP has gone much farther than any predecessor in the systematic



served to avert threats to democracy emanating from authoritarian-minded groupings, it has gradually and in ever stronger terms been politicized.

Prosecutors have rounded up hundreds of suspects, mostly in pre-dawn raids on their homes, and have charged 194 people with membership in an armed terrorist organization. The raids have targeted former military officers, academics, journalists and NGO activists. But a pattern emerged whereby prosecutors could show little or no evidence of any wrongdoing on the part of a substantial percentage of the suspects, many of whom appeared to have nothing in common except their political opposition to the AKP. Some suspects spent months in detention without being formally charged. Moreover, prosecutors' indictments began to defy reason—such as implicating the supposed terrorist organization in every act of political violence in Turkey's modern history—and revealed deep inconsistencies and internal contradictions. To make matters worse, wiretaps and evidence have been systematically leaked to the pro-AKP press, intimidating the opposition. The Ergenekon investigation has led to a climate of fear spreading in the ranks of opposition forces, reports Gareth Jenkins in *Between Fact and Fiction: Turkey's Ergenekon Investigation*, published in the Silk Road Papers series produced by SAIS's Central Asia-Caucasus Institute.

But perhaps the most worrying development in the AKP's second term is its onslaught on the independent media. In 2007, the country's centrist media outlets gradually began to voice criticism of the AKP's increasingly unilateralist policies. That elicited public rebukes from Erdogan. In April 2007, the State Insurance Deposits Fund sold the country's second-largest media group, Sabah/ATV, in a single-bidder auction—aided by financing from state banks and Qatar—to an energy company with close ties to the government, in which Erdogan's son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, served as a senior executive.

Things grew worse in 2008, when the country's largest media group, Dogan Media (DMG), began to report on a corruption case in Germany that implicated figures close to Erdogan and the AKP in

siphoning off millions of dollars from charities to fund pro-AKP media outlets in Turkey. Erdogan harshly castigated DMG, publicly and repeatedly urging his supporters to boycott all DMG outlets. The government then moved forcefully against DMG. In January 2009, tax authorities slammed DMG with a \$500 million fine for allegedly unpaid taxes, followed by another massive \$2.5 billion fine in September, exceeding the companies' market value. In sum, the AKP appears to be seeking to muzzle the opposition media and to forcibly transfer ownership of media outlets to the hands of businesses associated with the party leadership.

### **A Democratic Future?**

The AKP's first term generated great hopes that the party—and the movement of moderate Islam that it represented—would complete Turkey's democratization process and bring Turkey into Europe. But in its second term, the AKP has retreated significantly from its moderate image and democratic ideals. Instead of focusing on democratic reforms, it has cemented its influence over the bureaucracy, turned up the heat against its opponents and asserted growing control over the independent media. From having been a force for democratic development, evidence thus far suggests that the AKP has turned into an increasingly semi-authoritarian force bent on sustaining its position in power.

What does this trajectory imply regarding the prospects of moderate Islam? There are lessons to be drawn from the Turkish experience. A first lesson is the importance of checks and balances—in the AKP's first term, the president's office. As long as a secularist president remained in place, the AKP stayed true to its democratic and moderate rhetoric. But as soon as the AKP took over the presidency, its moderation gradually waned and was replaced by increasingly semi-authoritarian tendencies. Whether this was caused by the party leadership itself or by pressures from its base, it is apparent that the AKP failed to sustain its course without checks and balances. A second factor is the weakening of the gravitational pull of the European Union.

When the promise of EU membership dimmed, the AKP leadership appeared to revert in the direction of its Islamic roots, replete with Euro-skepticism, anti-Americanism and stronger semi-authoritarian traits.

In sum, the Turkish case suggests that “moderate Islam” is a dynamic and unpredictable political phenomenon. This is the case, perhaps, because it is inherently a moderated version of a political ideology with clearly authoritarian roots. An analogy here is the evolution of modern social democracy from its authoritarian Marxist roots. This happened over decades, within the framework of the checks and balances of an institutionalized democratic system. Likewise, the prospect of moderate Islam's acting as a democratizing force might prove viable only if operating within a system of checks and balances. In the Muslim world, of course, the question is who will provide these checks and balances.

Finally, the historical identification of Turkish secularism with semi-authoritarian statism has crippled it as a democratizing force, depriving it of intellectual strength and, ultimately, of democratic legitimacy. As state power and Islamic conservatism become fused, as is the case in Turkey today, the secular forces of the civil society—the Westernized urban middle class—are gradually marginalized. Perhaps the ultimate lesson to be drawn from the Turkish experience is that the power of the state cannot be indefinitely relied on to secure the moderation of Islam. When the state is “captured” by Islamic conservatism, it becomes clear that the moderation of political Islam in the end requires liberal rather than statist secularism.

Absent a vigorous liberal, civilian secularism, an Islamic conservatism that has inherited a state historically defined by semi-authoritarian impulses cannot be counted on to remain moderate. ■

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