

TURKISH LESSONS FOR EGYPT'S MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

Tozun Bahcheli

*Professor and Chair, Department of Political Science, King's University
College at the University of Western Ontario*

Islamist political parties have achieved electoral success in various Arab countries in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, most prominently in Tunisia and Egypt. In the parliamentary elections that were conducted in Tunisia in October 2011, the Ennahda party achieved easy victory, while the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party emerged the clear winner in the elections in Egypt. These parties have no prior experience of participation in government and only brief experience with democratic politics. Apart from vague commitments to "Islamic principles" and "democracy," what do they stand for and how are they likely to govern?

To allay anxieties in the United States and the major European countries, both parties have pledged to steer clear of the policies of the kind pursued by fundamentalist regimes such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Ennahda's leader, Rashid Ghannouchi, declared that a government led by his party would follow policies based on the 'Turkish model' and 'not that of Saudi Arabia or the Taliban'. On the other hand, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, while expressing respect for the achievements of Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), has been less categorical about endorsing Turkey's course. When Turkey's prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Egypt in November 2011 and extolled the virtues of a secular system of government, the Brotherhood's young members cheered him while senior leaders made it clear that they would follow their own path.

Be that as it may, there is no doubt that Turkey's AKP is viewed favourably in many Arab countries. Since coming to office in 2002, it has won three consecutive elections, each time increasing its percentage of the popular vote. Despite much initial alarm by secularists, the AKP has shown that religiosity can be fused with democracy and is no barrier to effective economic management.

The AKP has significantly enhanced Turkey's democratic credentials. And above all, it has presided over a period of surging economic growth during which Turkey's per capita income more than doubled, foreign investment and exports soared, and employment opportunities multiplied. As a result, Turkey enjoys greater respect and influence in its region than ever before and Prime Minister Erdogan is the most popular foreign leader in every Arab country where the previous regime was overthrown.

But is the AKP a realistic model? Before the AKP took power, previous Turkish Islamist parties had at various times been partners in governing coalitions. That experience cannot be replicated overnight. But in a world where information flows freely there is no good reason why parties in newly democratizing countries should not learn from the best practices of parties elsewhere. Indeed, there are useful lessons that Islamist parties can draw from the AKP and these are most apparent in the case of Egypt.

Like Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the AKP was widely suspected of having an Islamic fundamentalist agenda. The AKP response was to reassure its opponents, and perhaps forestall a military coup, by focusing on economic reforms, committing to "push hard" for membership in the European Union (much-favoured by secularists and the military), and declining to act on issues close to the heart of fervent Islamists, such as banning the consumption of alcoholic beverages. "We don't plan to disturb anyone's way of life," Erdogan declared. In a bid to avoid a confrontation with secularists, the party deferred action on an issue close to its heart, namely removing the ban on headscarves of women who attend Universities. Also, the AKP achieved modest gains in women's rights, thereby putting to rest secularist fears that such rights would be short-changed.

The powerful military occupies a similar status in Egypt to Turkey's armed forces in Turkey, and Egypt's generals are no more committed to democracy than their Turkish counterparts. They have bluntly declared that they intend to have a say in drawing Egypt's new constitution. This has placed the Brotherhood in a difficult quandary. Should it try to accommodate the generals or confront them?

Or could it take a page from the AKP's strategy book? When threatened by overbearing generals, the AKP adroitly chipped away at their political authority instead of confronting them openly, which it did only after winning a resounding second election victory. Then, when elements in the military were caught plotting a coup, the AKP let the justice system deal with them. At one point in 2009 over ten per cent of Turkey's generals and admirals were in jail. In an unprecedented move, on January 5, 2012, a civilian court ordered the arrest of Turkey's former military chief, Ilker Basbug, on the grounds that he led a conspiracy to overthrow the government. The era of military dominance appears to be over in Turkey.

Secular Egyptians and the Coptic minority fear becoming marginalized, or worse, if the Islamists set the country on a radical course. Here too the Brotherhood might usefully take a lesson from the AKP, which from the start understood that in a diverse country it would not be able to govern successfully or for very long if it governed solely in the interest of militant

Islamists. The AKP's hallmark has been one of moderation and avoidance of any radical policies that would widen the divide between religiously observant and secular Turks. This had the added benefit of securing US support for the AKP in its early years in office, thereby shielding the party from the generals most of whom continued to believe that the AKP intended to undermine Turkey's secular order. This is yet another lesson that Egyptian Islamists would do well to ponder. While U.S. power is waning in the region, as a key provider of arms and economic aid, Washington still has considerable leverage over Egypt's military. As the Turkish experience has shown, Washington's support can be a useful safeguard against meddling generals.

The AKP's record is not without notable failures. Thus far, its efforts to end hostilities between the Turkish state and militant Kurdish separatists have failed. Also, in recent years, the country's image as a model of democracy for the Muslim world has been tarnished by the arrest of nearly a hundred journalists, publishers, and academics on the grounds that they were involved in plots. Many of the arrested have been forced to await trial in jail for years before Turkey's sluggish courts would issue verdicts.

It is uncertain to what extent Islamists in the democratizing Arab countries are taking these shortcomings into account. In any case, the main lessons of the AKP for parties in newly democratizing states such as Egypt and others are twofold. First, sound management of the economy is a necessary precondition for success in other areas, including bringing the military under civilian control. Second, a moderate approach to governance can have broad and enduring appeal in a politically fractious country – which is something that Islamist parties hoping to win more than one election would do well to keep in mind.