



Is Islam the default explanation for the Erdoğan regime? - Ümit Cizre

Nov 08 2021 10:19 Gmt+3

Last Updated On: Nov 12 2021 12:15 Gmt+3

*In the final instalment of a four-part **series** on the nature of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's regime, academic and political scientist Ümit Cizre looks at the role played by Islam.*

Conventionally, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is seen in the legacy of the National Order Movement (NOM) that was born in the late 1960s before rising to prominence in the following decades.

Perhaps the NOM's most notable incarnation was the Welfare Party (RP), which headed a notorious coalition government in the 1990s and blundered through unsophisticated measures to bring back religion into public life, ultimately provoking a military coup-like intervention in 1997. The experience was crucial in forging the AKP, whose young new leadership around Recep Tayyip Erdoğan broke with the RP to form a new 'moderate' movement.

It was this 'moderate' Islamic character that was instrumental to the AKP's acceptance on a world stage being shaped by the end of the Cold War. The AKP won its first elections in 2002, just as Western countries were looking for a security partner to hold up as an example of the compatibility between democracy and Islam.

Islamic political tradition, fitted the bill perfectly. However, right from the very beginning, the AKP prioritised an Islamic influenced idea of justice, rather than liberal democracy.

In the last decade, this moral image as a party of justice has been irrecoverably tarnished by the AKP's actions in government. Instead, appeals to religious sensibilities have become a tool of to maintain Erdoğan's one-man-rule.

To depict Islamism as inherently authoritarian distracts from the essentially undemocratic character of Erdoğan's politics, which have become detached from any religious logic. Erdoğan's vision of power is distinctly secular in its drive to monopolise power in his own office.

"The AKP, from the onset, tried to wield political power, not cultural (religious) power," according to political scientist Menderes Çınar. "It assumed that as it held sway in the country, it would also achieve cultural power."

Evidence of the primacy of politics under Erdoğan can be seen in recent cultural-economic transformations in Turkish life. The AKP's embrace of global capitalism has seen international values make inroads into its pious social base. As Max Hoffman **argues**, this has led to "a secularisation tendency experienced by Muslims as well as an ascendancy of conservative values in society that is parallel to the former tendency".

What needs to be acknowledged here is that the historically abused secular-Islamist divide has been challenged by the AKP's synthesis of a secular modernising lifestyle with a drive to put Islam-derived values at the core of life.

In the meantime, the traditional image of a secular foe has become less and less important. Consumerism and a massive generation of capital has created a commonality between the conservatives and secular masse, taking the edge off old dividing lines.

The softening of attitudes among conservatives does not, however, seem to carry the potential either for a more democratic politics, as seen in their ongoing support for Erdoğan, a prolific jailer of journalists, intellectuals, and opposition politicians.

The focus of Erdoğan loyalists is living by conservative moral values mixed with nationalism and prosperity. Unlike many other strongmen

In this context, Erdoğan's religious commitments are the instruments rather than the engine of his authorisation discourse. His public expressions of disenchantment with globalisation do not include vilification of the free market model. Rather, Islamic references relate to society's values and lifestyles.

As a ferocious political animal with limitless pragmatism, the prime movers of Erdoğan's politics are essentially severed from Islam. Nor has he prioritised conservative moral values at the expense of tangible economic achievements.

The strong push by the AKP's social base to climb the socio-economic ladder has even been **compared** by prominent leftist commentator Ahmet Insel to a "democratic bourgeoisie revolution". As a result, Erdoğan is careful to put the economic and political interests of his conservative, middle-class voters over a dogmatic commitment to Islamic politics.

Erdoğan has achieved a major sociological power shift by building a new power base of both diehard loyalists and the winners from globalisation. This balance of power favours not a top-down Islamisation process, but instead tends towards a quasi-fascism

The pathologies which Erdoğan's regime have set in motion may well outlast him. The massive scale of repression shows the decay of state institutions, particularly the security forces and judiciary. While the brutality of these measures has obliterated the memory of Erdoğan's early reforms. Any new vision to rebuild Turkey has been cancelled.

Even Erdoğan loyalists no longer seem interested in the transformational promise of the early AKP, adjusting instead to permanent crisis. The party's actors generate no discourse beyond continual war at home and abroad.

The most striking irony of all is that, had the July 2016 failed coup succeeded, it would be difficult to claim with certainty that the junta would have gone further than the Erdoğan regime's scorched-earth policy of eviscerating democratic politics.



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The unmatched scale of Erdoğan's crackdown - Ümit Cizre



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