



The AKP and the Emergence of Political Islam

The Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) swept to power in Turkey in a landslide election victory in 2002. They have remained in office ever since, under the leadership of the charismatic Prime Minister-turned-President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Erdoğan and his party have become highly divisive in Turkey. While they maintain a strong support base in some quarters, there are many others who fear that the country's secular heritage is being eroded by a religiously-oriented and increasingly authoritarian government.

The question of Islam and its relationship to politics has been debated throughout Turkey's history as a secular republic. The major figure in Turkish political Islam during this time was Necmettin Erbakan, founder of an Islamist movement called Milli Görüş (National Outlook or National Vision) as well as various religiously-inspired political parties. In the 1990s, Erbakan served as Prime Minister of a coalition government and brought a sharia-oriented agenda into the mainstream of Turkish politics for the first time.

A pivotal event that facilitated the gradual emergence of Islamism in national politics was a military coup on 12 September 1980. Intended to bring an end to years of factional violence between hard line leftist groups, and right wing nationalists and religious conservatives, the 1980 coup and its aftermath radically changed Turkish society and re-defined the role that Islam could play in public life. A new doctrine known as the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis was implemented in the decade that followed. This sought to bring Islam back into the mainstream of national life in order to serve a cohesive function. It should be remembered that the backdrop of the Cold War at the time stoked fears about the spread of Communism, and religion promised to serve as a powerful buffer to such a threat.

In the 1980s and 90s, Islamist political parties including the Welfare Party and the Virtue Party capitalised on the opportunities of this new religious climate and achieved some success. All, however, were ultimately shut down on charges of contravening the secular formational principles of the Turkish Republic. The AKP was founded by previous members of Welfare and Virtue, and was designed to be able to navigate legally within a secularist framework and thus to avoid closure. Accordingly, its manifesto played down sharia-related demands, and focused instead on strong economic policies buffered by an appeal to social conservatism and cultural Islam. Its success in the 2002 elections was largely due to its ability to appeal to a much wider constituency (including many secularists) than its Islamist predecessors had.

The AKP has been in power continuously since 2002, and has become increasingly centred on the charismatic personality of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In 2013, widespread protests challenged Erdoğan's encroaching authoritarianism during the so-called Gezi Park crisis – an event that was triggered by the threatened development of one of Istanbul's remaining green spaces into a shopping complex, and which escalated into violent encounters between protesters and police in towns and cities across Turkey. The strength of the police's



response to Gezi – which resulted in eleven deaths and thousands of injuries - ensured that few mass protests have occurred since.

President Erdoğan faced a further serious challenge on 15 July 2016, when a rebel faction within the Turkish armed forces staged an attempt at a military coup. The coup was badly organised and failed to achieve its goals of capturing the president and imposing a caretaker military regime. It led to the declaration of a state of emergency that is on-going in 2017, and the most extensive purges in modern Turkish history. These have been directed primarily against the followers of a controversial imam called Fethullah Gülen, who is introduced in Activity 4.

Watch this interview with President Erdoğan on the subject of constitutional changes, passed in April 2017, which give him enhanced presidential powers:

<http://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2017/04/18/erdogan-turkey-referendum-anderson-interview-sdg-orig.cnn/video/playlists/turkey/>

Watch this short documentary about the Gezi Park protests and their legacy:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUYykmxgITA>

Read this article on Gezi and the protesters' rejection of the AKP's neoliberal ideology:

http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/12009/occupy-gezi_the-limits-of-turkey's-neoliberal-succ

Questions:

1. What do the highly polarized responses to President Erdoğan in Turkey reveal about the country's internal social and religious dynamics?
2. How is neoliberalism connected to religion in the case of the AKP?
3. To what extent is Atatürk's secularist legacy still visible in Turkey?