

Research Note

Turkey's dissonant engagement with modernity

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Abstract: Turkey is the first Muslim country to engage with modernity as an integral phenomenon; its cultural and intellectual components being pre-requisites for its political project, and embodied in democracy. This paradigm, which was adopted by Ataturk and his secularist elites failed for several reasons. A markedly different approach was put forward by the Justice and Development Party which came to power in 2002 in which the modern political system was posited on conservative religious values in an attempt to come to terms with modernity and provide a model for the Muslim world. This latter undertaking shows signs of dissonance, ambiguity and uncertainty. It also does not conform to the paradigm of *multiple modernities* through which a country achieves progress and development without submitting to the intellectual discourse of modernity or its political project. The approach adopted by the Justice and Development Party seems to fall within what is termed *Post-Islamism* in which a fusion is made between Islam and freedom, *shari'ah* and human rights, and piety and women's empowerment. This article is devoted to the exploration of the above themes.

Keywords: Modernity, Kemalism, post-Islamism, democratic religious government, Justice and Development Party.

Abstrak: Turki merupakan negara Islam pertama yang terlibat dengan permodenan sebagai satu fenomena yang penting; komponen budaya dan inteleknya menjadi pra-syarat untuk projek politik, yang termaktub dalam demokrasinya. Paradigma yang diterima pakai oleh Ataturk dan elit-elitnya yang sekular gagal akibat beberapa sebab. Satu pendekatan yang amat berbeza

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diutarakan oleh Parti Keadilan dan Pembangunan yang mendapat kuasa pada tahun 2002 yang mengemukakan sistem politik moden yang berasaskan nilai-nilai agama yang koservatif dalam usaha menerima pemodenan dan menyediakan satu model bagi dunia Islam. Penglibatan pendekatan yang akhir ini menunjukkan tanda-tanda ketidakseimbangan, kekaburan dan ketidakpastian. Ia juga tidak selari dengan paradigma Kepelbagaian Permodenan, yang mana sesebuah negara mencapai kemajuan dan pembangunan tanpa menerima wacana intelektual moden ataupun kepada projek politik. Pendekatan yang diterima pakai oleh Parti Keadilan dan Pembangunan dilihat lebih mirip kepada Pasca-Islamisme yang mana gabungan dibuat antara Islam dan kebebasan, shari'ah dan hak asasi manusia, dan takwa serta memperkasakan wanita. Kertas kerja ini ditujukan kepada penerokaan tema-tema yang tersebut di atas.

Kata kunci: Permodenan, Kemalisme, pasca-Islamisme, kerajaan agama demokratik, Parti Keadilan dan Pembangunan.

In a review of a recently published book on Turkey's engagement with modernity containing the proceedings of a conference pertaining to the subject convened by the Oxford University's Programme on Contemporary Turkey, the reviewer laments the fact that out of a total of 24 papers dealing with different aspects of Turkey's relationship with various aspects of modernization, not a single one deals with the important topic of modernity and how it applies to the Turkish situation (Alyanak, 2010). In reality, the question regarding how modernity and its intellectual discourse and political project apply to the Turkish scene is an issue that has hardly been broached in literature relating to modern Turkey. This article attempts to shed some understanding on the subject matter.

Modernity: Intellectual discourse and political project

According to Alain Touraine, a definition of modernity involves the diffusion of rationality in all spheres of life and the consideration of reason as the source of knowledge and the criterion of value (Touraine, 1995). Furthermore, modernity possesses intellectual discourse and a political project. The first component is centred upon qualities such as subjectivity and maturity, while the latter is composed of popular sovereignty, citizenship rights and the separation of powers.

Subjectivity involves the growth of the personality in terms of agency, consciousness, and self-referencing and is associated with

matters such as the usage of reason, acting upon the world and the pursuit of happiness. Subjectivity additionally involves the definition of the individual as a bearer of rights who is not so much concerned with duty. This is in contradiction to the notion of the human beings in medieval times when they were primarily concerned with fulfilling their duties before God, a notion that remains relevant in many traditional societies. This central notion of the intellectual discourse of modernity is closely aligned with another central premise in this domain which is maturity, a central component according to Kant.

The political project of modernity is premised on recognizing the people as the real source of power and the principle that the votes of the majority lend legitimization to the system of government. This is called popular sovereignty and together with the principle of citizenship rights and the separation of powers constitute the main components of modern political systems.

At this juncture, it is therefore crucial to take into consideration that the intellectual discourse of modernity acts as a kind of cultural infrastructure for its political project, without which the latter would not enjoy popular legitimacy or act as a system of government which enjoys stability and deep-rootedness. Democracy is not a system that a country can import and establish institutional and administrative organs in order for it to succeed. In fact, it requires for its legitimization, stability and a well-functioning system of values, which is thus, none other than the intellectual discourse of modernity.

Ataturk's modernization project

Kemal Ataturk, the father of modern Turkey, understood the above equation well. For this reason, he was committed to effecting a cultural change in the mores and traditions of the Turkish people as a necessary pre-condition for entry into modernity. For him, secularism was the solution and this involved not just merely the separation of the state from the institutions of Islam but the liberation of the individual mind from traditional Islamic concepts and practices. Modernization for him could not be successful without a preceding, or at the very least, accompanying process of social and cultural transformation. For Ataturk and his circle, modernity was "a total project: one of embracing and internalizing all the cultural dimensions that made Europe modern" (Keyder, 2000). He, therefore, took aim at Islam, regarding it to be the

impediment to Turkey's social, cultural and political transformation along modernist lines.

The vision elaborated above, which was shared by Atatruk and his secularist posse, however, suffered two major problems. The first was that the majority of the population did not share their belief in the cultural discourse of modernity which entailed cultural secularism. To overcome this problem, Atatruk embarked on a programme aimed at eradicating all traces of Islamic influence in schools and the public sphere which made itself manifest in the changing of the alphabet from Arabic to Latin, the abolishment of religious seminaries and the encouragement of the outward manifestation of women's liberation. This orientation did not lend popular legitimacy to his regime and his ultimate reliance for the maintenance of his power was on the military forces, at complete odds and in opposition to genuinely democratic system of government which represents the will of their people. The second major problem was that his drive towards modernization was authoritarian in the sense that the modernizers in his regime were composed of a distinct governing group who wielded state power and who were not interested in the full unfolding of the modernization and democratization process, lest it gives rise to other contenders for power. It was a top-down modernization and a controlled process that did not perceive the modernization process as a mechanism of social transformation. The emphasis was more on the Western-oriented manifestation of cultural modernity.

Conservative democracy

It was obvious that such a system would not enjoy the loyalty of the majority of the population and that, once the dictatorship eased, attempts would be made to give expression to the cultural aspirations of a significant component of the Turkish people. Various attempts in this direction culminated in the rise of social groups which espoused Islam as a principal social marker, the most significant being the Justice and Development Party (JDP), headed by Recep Tayyib Erdogan, which came to power in 2002. This party reached a correct diagnosis, realizing that Islam represented the majority of the Turkish people, a major component of their identity. Furthermore, that any successful form of governance would have to take into account Islamic values and aspirations. Its vision consisted of basing the intellectual discourse of the ruling ideological system on Islamic values and principles while

retaining the political project of modernity, democracy being its major manifestation. It was thought, by theoreticians and intellectuals aligned with the Justice and Development Party, that this burgeoning system would constitute a rapport between Islam and modernity and would act as a model for Islamic societies aiming at doing away with backwardness and dictatorial regimes. This paradigm was termed by the JDP as a “conservative democracy” (Donmez, 2010) and was aimed at reconciling a democratic system of government with values and social practices derived from the Islamic intellectual heritage. There was a rather inflated appraisal, among leaders of the JDP, of this paradigm as it was thought to provide a model for the Muslim world through which Muslim societies can enter modernity without sacrificing their value system.

This engagement with modernity may not prove to be a workable solution to the socio-political condition of Turkey and the wider Muslim world especially if we take into consideration that the democratic system of government is not just a procedural and administrative system which can be imported and applied in different countries without giving consideration to the cultural and intellectual components that act as legitimizing factors and ensure that the system of government enjoys popular legitimacy and support. On the other hand, the system of values in Turkish society on which the nascent political system is currently posited is bound to have an impact on the orientation of Turkey’s foreign policy. This may not necessarily go hand in hand with conventional democratic systems regardless of righteousness or otherwise towards which the policies of these governmental systems are oriented. It is in this vein that the comments of Jacques Chirac, a former French President, about the conditions which are necessary for Turkey to gain entry into the EU become relevant. In a telling comment, Chirac pronounced that in order for Turkey to be considered as part of the European Union it needs nothing less than a “major cultural revolution” (Chirac, 2005). In other words nothing less than the adoption of the intellectual discourse of modernity which entails cultural secularism.

The Justice and Development Party’s, rather simplistic, engagement with modernity is similar to other attempts in the Muslim world to come to terms and to reconcile with this phenomenon; as with the project of the Iranian thinker Abdul Karim Soroush for a “democratic religious government.” In this project, Soroush contends that the system of

governance is composed of three components which he asserts are rights, duties, the scientific management of government and values, and that the first two can be derived from historical experience and secular sources and that the latter can be based on religion and that in this way people may have a democratic religious government that is able to provide a solution for the impasse found with regards to Islam's predicament with modernity. Soroush would later renounce this attempt at finding a rapport between a democratic system of government and religious values as evidenced by his endeavor to humanize religion in his later writings such as *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience* (2009).

If the wholesale adoption of modernity is not suitable for either the Turkish society or the Muslim world at large, as shown by the Atatürkian model which was implemented in Turkey for at least half a century, and its selective application is also not workable as argued from the experience of the nascent system of government in Turkey led by the JDP; then the question that poses itself is what is a workable solution for Turkey's and, by implication, Islam's engagement with modernity?

Multiple modernities

The answer to this question requires addressing Islam's complex relationship with modernity, and it is here that late sociologist Ernest Gellner offers some insights which shed light on this delicate subject. According to Gellner, Islam is closer to modernity than the two other monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity, due to its universalism, a strong rationalist tradition and its emphasis on following the law or *Shari'ah*. Gellner adds, however, that out of the three religions, Islam has proven to be the most resistant to secularism (Gellner, 1992). This central insight is very important to understanding Islam's engagement with modernity and also explains why many researchers and academics may have a variety of different, often conflicting and confusing, opinions pertaining to Islam's agreement with democracy or its lack thereof.

Gellner's insight about the complex relationship between Islam and modernity sheds light on the new theorizing about *multiple modernities* which essentially means that non-Western societies do not necessarily have to replicate the process through which Western culture became developed and achieved modernity. Traditional development theory has it that as societies become developed and modernized,

cultural secularism soon ensued. One explanation of this is that with increased urbanization, society becomes atomized and religion loses its social base; a process that is closely aligned to differentiation, and considered by Weber to be one of the main processes of secularization. Alternatively, as science becomes more advanced and is able to explain, to a large extent, numerous natural phenomena; religion loses its interpretative power. This has not happened in the Muslim world. If anything, with modernization and development religious observance has only increased. Therefore, according to the paradigm of *multiple modernities*, modernity and Westernization are not identical.

In the Muslim world, since at least the decade following the end of the Second World War, there were major manifestations of modernization, as seen in increased levels of higher education, mass urbanization, empowerment of women and structural differentiation in society. Yet, if anything, religious adherence was only on the rise. This is embodied in what became known as Islamic revivalism, or Islamic re-assertion which affected most parts of the Muslim world, and following the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, became a potent agent in international relations.

The way that Islamic revivalism has been influenced by modernization and modernity is that these gave a boost to the dormant rationalistic tradition in the Muslim world which has resulted in the hermeneutical uncoupling between the original Islamic principles and the contingent elements that have attached themselves to Muslim heritage through the mediums of tribal societies and patriarchy and a sense of fatalism. This is without giving in to secularism. This is perhaps manifested most remarkably in the case of the modern Muslim women who are experiencing empowerment, higher levels of university education, agency, mobility and visibility in the social sphere and at the same time adhering to religious precepts and its most visible symbol - the Muslim veil.

What is pertinent in the phenomenon of Islamic revival for the purposes of this article is that Muslim societies have not only shown a tendency to re-embrace the cultural values of Islam but that these same values have a profound impact on the vision of the ideal political system that Muslims wish to be governed by. This aspect has not been replicated in the two other monotheistic religions that have witnessed thorough degrees of secularization both on the cultural and political levels. If this

is the case with regards to the two monotheistic religions, Christianity and Judaism, the issue with regard to non-Western societies, other than the Muslim world, is very telling in that the political processes of these countries are even less informed by cultural and religious precepts. According to S. N. Eisenstadt (2000), a major theoretician of *multiple modernities*, in monotheistic religions the political system has been perceived as the major arena for the implementation of transcendental utopian visions. This has been much weaker in the Hindu and Buddhist countries. In fact, these countries fit well within the paradigm of the secularization theory for, apart from what was mentioned above, modernization for them implies a certain degree of cultural secularism. Accordingly, Japan may not be a model for the successful rapprochement between tradition and modernity.

The relevance of the above in the context of the Turkish case is that there exists a certain degree of reciprocity between the religious-cultural system and the political system of government. A proper functioning democracy cannot subsist without a set of cultural traditions that are deeply ingrained within both the history and outlook of the majority of the population of a particular country. It is this intellectual system that grants democracy its legitimacy, stability and what constitutes a final reference towards which people turn in resolving crisis, negotiation of peaceful transfers of power and the ensuring of people's basic rights. If we attempt to retain a democratic system of government and choose to posit it on an alternative set of cultural values, then this is bound not to work. For these cultural values will ultimately have an impact on the political system and cause the country which embraces such a system to orient itself in the political field—especially foreign policy—in directions that would be seen by other democratic countries, whether rightly or wrongly, as not conforming with the priorities of democratic countries. In such a case, a great measure of dissonance is born between the hopes of the people, whose ultimate aspiration is that the political process reflects their cultural values. The end result culminates in a system of government that is not genuinely democratic nor fitting the paradigm of multiple modernities where a country comes to terms with modernity without giving in to secularization at the cultural or political levels.

A number of scholars have attempted to portray Turkey's dissonant relationship with modernity as a kind of post-modern engagement with

the modernist phenomenon that seeks modernization, rationality and progress but implies “no normative commitment to the Enlightenment project” (Keyder, 2000). This in fact, may not be an appropriate way to describe the Turkish situation, as a country must first pass through the phase of modernity before consideration should be given to whether its process of engagement with the modern world may be considered as postmodern or not. Post-modernism may be considered as a form of critique of the modernist project, and especially in the form of an attack on the rationalist project in that Western reason is parochial, draws on irrational impulses in the subconscious, marginalizes minorities and is implicated in the knowledge-power paradigm. This does not accurately reflect the Turkish situation.

What is closer to the truth might be the paradigm that most closely reflects the reality of Turkey's engagement with modernity, and what is termed Post-Islamism which constitutes a vision of Islam that is inclusive, pluralist, and rights-oriented and looks positively towards material acquisition and the enjoyment of life. In the words of one of its theorists, Asef Bayat, Post-Islamism has a daring logic which is “to turn the underlying principles of Islamism on their head by emphasizing rights instead of duties, plurality in place of a singular authoritative voice, ambiguity instead of certainty, historicity rather than fixed scripture and the future instead of the past” (Bayat, 2009). Post-Islamism aims at rethinking Islam in order to bring it closer to a harmonic congruence with democracy and human rights by either claiming that the original message of Islam conceived these notions before they were implemented in the West or that any procedures, laws and institutions which aim to uphold justice, benefit human beings and preserve their rights should be considered among the *māqāṣid* of Islam.

Whether or not such a formulation for Islam's coming to terms with modernity will work only the future will tell. What is certain for the time being is that the positioning of a system of government on a set of ideas and values not deeply rooted in the history and consciousness of the people is bound to produce tension, ambiguity and uncertainty.

Conclusion

In its post-caliphate history, Turkey has had two major approaches in its engagement with modernity. During the time of Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, an attempt was made at the wholesale importation

of modernity into both its cultural and political components. This failed for several reasons. The Justice and Development Party which came to power in 2002 has since adopted another approach which involved the implementation of the political project of modernity embodied in democracy while retaining a cultural and value system more in tune with Islam, the religion of the majority of the Turkish people. This latter endeavor exhibits signs of dissonance, ambiguity and uncertainty. It may very well be that the paradigm of *multiple modernities* in which a country embarks on modernization, empowerment and progress without giving in to the intellectual discourse of modernity or its political project may be more promising for the conditions of the Muslim world.

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