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Turkey's AKP: A Model "Muslim-Democratic" Party?

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Journal of Democracy

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 16, Number 3, July 2005

pp. 69-82

10.1353/jod.2005.0053

ARTICLE

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Abstract

Turkey's democracy reached a turning point with the meteoric rise of the pro-Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the 2002 election. Surprising many, the AKP has launched an aggressive reform process to meet the European Union's Copenhagen criteria. The AKP-led "quiet revolution" raises serious questions as to how the reforms will shape the future of Turkish democracy and what role Islam will play in it. Three areas in which the party's policies appear paradoxical are examined: its commitment to decentralization while curbing intra-party democracy, democratic reforms without civil society input, and party institutionalization without having formulated an enduring ideology.

TURKEY'S AKP: A MODEL “MUSLIM-DEMOCRATIC” PARTY?

Sultan Tepe

Sultan Tepe is assistant professor of political science at the University of Illinois–Chicago and a native of Istanbul. The following essay is based on field research that she has been conducting in Turkey with a grant from the United States Institute of Peace.

The meteoric rise to power of Turkey's pro-Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) under the controversial and charismatic premier Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has broken old patterns and raised serious questions about the future shape and direction of Turkish democracy. Will the popularity of a party that formed only a few months before its November 2002 electoral triumph prove enduring, especially in a country with a long history of shifting voter loyalties and party alignments? How can the AKP's leaders—some of whom have records of expressing radical Islamist beliefs—integrate Islamic appeals into Turkey's aggressively secularist public sphere? Is the AKP, as some claim, spearheading the consolidation of liberal democracy in Turkey and becoming the world's leading model of a Muslim democratic party? Or is it, as less friendly observers suggest, disguising its agenda in order to bolster Turkish Islamists behind a front of democratic rhetoric? Or does the AKP lack a clear vision of any kind and steer more by electoral calculation than ideological commitment?

In order to shed light on these issues, it will be helpful to examine three areas in which the party appears to be enmeshed in paradoxes or otherwise at odds with itself. To begin with, the AKP has sought to curb the central state's power and to enhance democracy's institutional basis—but the AKP is doing so through means that are undermining its own commitment to intraparty democracy and threatening to marginalize other actors in the public sphere. This is the paradox of centralizing the AKP in order to decentralize the state. Next, the AKP is seeking to institutionalize itself more fully—but without expressing clear ideological positions, probably for fear of splitting its own disparate support



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