

The Projection of the Political Turkish Model beyond the Balkans

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Abstract

Since the fall of the USSR, Turkey began to emerge as the most important international and interregional player in the area. Its geostrategically significant location, its size and its relations with Turkmens, adding its desire to westernise without losing its Islamic roots, made of the country the best competitor to become leader of the region. This position apparently got reinforced in 2005 (the opening of negotiations with the EU), but since that moment until now, the pieces of that regional “chessboard” have changed their strategic value. Erdogan’s Turkey has lost velocity and interest into a goal named Europe, at the same time it has turned to the Arab world. Precisely, the democratic processes that seem to get initiated in the Mediterranean region and the Middle East have shown a new possibility in which Turkey could be established as a model to be followed by those countries.

Keywords: Political Turkey model, export, Arab spring, democratic future

1. Introduction

The various questions raising from this new scenery might be grouped in three main approaches. Firstly, the Turkish model’s own viability due to two specific issues: ¿Is Turkish democracy really consolidated to the point of being exported to other places?; and even admitting that was the case, ¿Would this model be viable for Arab countries which have undergone the Arab spring? Secondly, the implications for Turkish politics on resuming its old Ottoman role of regional power, lost almost a century ago, should be explored. And thirdly, a great unknown remains, this time relative to the consequences of these actions for the West, particularly for the European Union if Turkey made a major turn in its foreign policy towards the Arab world at the expense of Europe.

These are all very difficult questions we are not aiming to leave them answered, however we expect our analysis to shed light on a brighter vision of a future landscape that displays itself as complex.

2. The Political Turkish Model and Its Possible Export

In 1923 Turkey embarked, with Mustafa Kemal, in a political revolution that left the Ottoman Empire premises behind, opting for the separation of church and state, nationalism and political incorporation to the West. At the same time, a difficult journey began for society, one in which its religious beliefs were limited to the private sphere, while its everyday life was shaken by strange elements which had remained foreign until then. Among others: equality between men and women (female vote was introduced in 1934); the ban on the use of fez and the harems disappearance; a new Latin alphabet; a surname, something that Turks had never had before; western working week; and a laicism that impregnated everything, from education and architecture to politics and law. Gradually, Turks were able to assume Kemalist ideology, base of their current democracy, as their own. Considering what we are analysing it is important to have the word democracy very present, because in the different Arab countries, including Egypt, which is said to be the best laboratory to test a possible implementation of the Turkish model, there is not, nor does it seem likely to exist in a near future, an ideological stream with the strength of kemalism; nor has a charismatic leader in the style of Mustafa Kemal emerged, someone with the ability to group a whole country among him. Another factor we should not forget, since it explains the strength of Atatürk to some extent, is that the change faced by the Turks was a consequence of an extreme situation (fall of the Ottoman Empire, territory loss, humiliation of the peace treaties...) and it was also an important trigger that helped the father of modern Turkey to bring Turkish people around his figure.

Moving on to other issues, Turkey's recent history highlights how the constant political presence of the military has been decisive for the establishment, and above all, the consolidation of laicism and democracy in the country. Even though the military capacity for intervention has been seriously undermined by the last reforms, we should not forget that during the last 80 years, its direct interventions in the government have enabled the maintenance of laicism and democratic development, because once the situation was normalised, Turkish military knew how to step down from power and they were the ones promoting a new constitution and the return to democratic practice. This happened in 1983, after the 1980 coup, being the newly approved constitution the framework for the changes occurred in Turkey during the last fifteen years⁽¹⁾. Because of this peculiarity that has dominated Turkish policy until the latest Erdogan reforms, many analysts have been led to consider Turkish democracy as still being in a transition period, consequently understood as a questionable model for Arab countries. In addition, the fact that the military played such an important role for the governments before the Arab spring in other countries of the zone, as Egypt, makes it difficult for the Turkish model to be well received. Even if that is an aspect to take into account, and which as we will see later has a major influence, neither must we forget how between Turkish military and Egyptian military for instance, stands a fundamental difference which is that only the later have exercised power from personalism and intentions of permanency.

One of the most controversial issues, since is one of the main concerns for the West, is Islamism, however it might be more accurate no to refer to Islamism itself, but to the compatibility between Islam and democracy. Even if Turkey's case encourages to think in positive terms about it at the first moment, neither should we be overly optimistic, since recent events impose a variety of cautions at the moment of foreseeing the future. Let us remember that in those countries where elections have been held, Islamist candidates have obtained a wide victory. In the case of Tunisia, moderate party Al Nahda or Ennahda Movement won of the 217 seats in the National Constituent Assembly. The second place, although at a great distance, was occupied by centrist Congress for the Republic, with only 30 seats. In the other hand, this is the country which most closely resembles the Turkish model, since it had a markedly secular Constitution and a Civil Code which could be considered as unique in Arab countries in terms of women's rights and protection to public rights and liberties. In the case of Egypt things are more complicated. In the legislative election held between 27 November 2011 and 22 February 2012, from a total of 11.1 million votes cast, the Freedom and Justice Party, from the Muslim Brotherhood, obtained more than 4 million (36.3%) and the ultraconservative Al-Nour Party, from the Salafists, gained 3.2 million (28.7%). Third place was occupied by liberal party Wafd with a million votes (9.6%), while the Egyptian Bloc, which brings together liberal and lay forces, obtained slightly more than 150,000 votes (1.3%).

According to these figures, in the People's Assembly Islamist parties have a broad majority (65%) over the liberal political forces. This was also the case in the other camera, the Shura Council, in which Islamist parties also dominate with a broad majority. And in the presidential election (June 2012), following the information of Al-jazeera, The Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi, was declared winner by more than 51% of the votes (13.2 million votes out of just over 26 million). Although the president-elected delivered a victory address in which he said "I have no rights, only responsibilities" and he also reached out to the army, the police, and Egypt's intelligence services, thanking them for their work in protecting the country, and promised to "preserve" the military, the reality shows confused.

These are not the best results to expect a democratic future, despite the moderation promises from the Muslim Brothers, who have already stated that the Constitution will be Islamic and while other religions will be allowed, everyone will be subject to a constitutional text inspired by the Sharia. However, we should not overlook the possible future role of the army, which seems no to be willing to lose its former power and has started to play the game "is either us or the bearded men". Neither must we lose sight of the Tharir Square movement, which started the revolution and while lacking representation as a political party and still being very unstructured, is a combative force that has a clear democratic willingness in the western style.

¹Although the 1983 Constitution remains in force to the present date, it has experienced so many important amendments throughout its validity that it could be said that very few elements remained from the original text (about a third part). Moreover, at these moments Turkey has started the drafting process of a new Constitution expected to be ready for approval by the end of this year. If so, it would not only be the first Constitution written by a Parliament in times of peace, but it would also be a text preceded by an important campaign of opinion collection about its contents among the population. This initiative was known as "Turkey Speaks" and more than 6,000 Turks participated.

This latter reference to other religions and the Muslim law, leads us to take into account another controversial issue of Turkish democracy, the one referring to nationalism and treatment of minorities, either religious or ethnic. History of minorities in the Republic of Turkey is identified with their denial and persecution, especially with regard to Kurd minority, the largest in number but not the only one. Turkey's approach of proximity with the European Union and its constant attempts to become a member have been a strong instrument for implementing important reforms on the subject. Due to legal changes driven by the European Union, minorities in Turkey have a series of recognised rights that refer to language, education or the possibility to have their own programs in the communication media. In the specific case of religion, while most examples are very punctual, they illustrate how in relation to religious practice a series of change have also been produced. In this sense, AKP's government has undertaken the task of reconstruction and recovery of abandoned religious buildings in order to turn them not into places of worship, but into museums, since they have been recognised as part of the Turkish cultural heritage. Besides, once they have been opened to the public, what has been occasionally allowed is that on specific dates (important holidays for the involved cult), people belonging to each religion may enter without paying any fee, apart from celebrating their rites.

However, this does not mean under any case that churches have legal recognition. In this sense, it should be remembered that Turkish Constitution allows the exercise of religion as long as it does not violate the secularity of the state. Hence religious instruction is subject to control by the state. Now, what the constitutional framework admits is the existence of religious foundations, which have traditionally administered churches. According to 1936 law, these foundations were not allowed to own property, and for that reason were never able to buy a religious building, for example, neither could they accept any inheritance since they were denied this right. This changed in 2002, when the 1936 law was amended and the state began to allow religious foundations to acquire immovable property. And as of 2008, a new reform authorised the devolution of previously expropriated properties by the state. This does not stop being important, however, it cannot conceal the fact that in its practical application, the majority of these issues belong more to a concrete and punctual concession policy from the political power, than to a change in political trend. There is still a long way to go in order to guarantee those concessions, and for them to receive a genuine legal support missing today in many cases that still depend of the state's benevolence. As stated by Monsignor Franceschini, Apostolic Administrator of Anatolia since 2010 in substitution of the assassinated Bishop Luigi Padovese (18.04.2010), in *Infocatolica* what is needed is "to receive official legal recognition: some catholic churches must perform their services previously creating non-governmental organizations and associations. We Catholics are not even able to arrange our churches or adequately manage our properties".

As for Islamic parties, there is also an element in the Turkish model that we must have in mind, and that is their constant presence not only in the streets, but also within the regular political game. Among other reasons, this has prevented an "algerization" of politics in Turkey, since Islamism has always had a place as a political actor, even in the opposition. This is a very important element to take into account when talking about the export of the Turkish model to other territories, considering that the situation of most of these places is different. Egypt, for example. In this case the reality is in fact the opposite, even when the Muslim Brotherhood was the recipient of a certain tolerance from the state, it was not allowed as a political party and for that reason was unable to participate in public policy. And we are referring to what was considered to be (and still is) the best organised and most developed Islamist group in the Egyptian political landscape.

That was also true for other religious groups, which takes us to point out a central fact: the nowadays political party of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Freedom and Justice Party, has become a first generation political formation in the context of Egyptian Islamism, while the current AKP, the Turkish Islamist political party in power since 2002, is already the third generation of political Turkish Islamism. This party emerged from the Virtue Party or Fazilet Partisi, which in turn emerged from the former Refah Partisi, or Welfare Party of Necmettin Erbakan (the first Islamist ever to become to power in 1996), declared illegal and dissolved in June 2001 by the Constitutional Court. Then, a group of reformists denominated Yenilikçiler, among whom there were the current Prime Minister as well as the actual President, founded the Fazilet Partisi first, and the AKP or Justice and Development Party next. Erbakan, considered by many as the political father of Erdogan, had previously founded the National Salvation Party in 1970, joining Islamism to more prosaic matters such as industrial development. When this party was declared illegal, Erbakan became a member of the National Salvation Party, which was also dissolved after the 1980 military coup, headed by General Evren.

Having briefly explored the Islamist political trajectory until the arrival of the AKP, firstly to the political arena and later to the government, it is clear that at least in this field we have to be very careful when making comparisons between the Turkish party and the Muslim Brotherhood and similar formations, because such comparisons might not be excessively correct given the crucial difference of active permanence through time.

Furthermore, the history of Turkish Islamism, previously outlined in such a brief way, reveals that the transition towards moderate positions and religious tolerance, as well as its political normalization, has not come without important problems and strong confrontations with laicism and its guarantors (the Armed Forces and the Constitutional Court). For that matter, it would not be wrong to say that more than conviction, it has been pragmatism, motivated by the Turkish political system itself and its laicism guarantees, what has forced Islamism to evolve in order to ensure not only its permanence in politics, but also its arrival to power. And following the same reasoning, it does not seem too bold to say that other corresponding political formations must pass through a similar process in time, for us to be able to refer, also in those cases, to a moderate Islamism capable of governing in democracy without jeopardising the latter. The obvious conclusion is that in order to be able to integrate into a democratic system, Islamism requires the existence of politically strong lay institutions that mandate an overcoming of the Sharia as supreme law, as well as the adoption of legal, juridical and democratic principles instead. And here stands the great difference, in the states that have experienced the Arab spring does not seem likely that there will be a strong secular state. Returning to the example of Egypt, according to the election winners' statements, laicism will not be present in the Constitution, hence it shall not be used as a moderation tool as has been the case in Turkey. This almost certain difference makes it difficult for the export of the Turkish model to be successful in a state that will privilege Islamic law over the Constitution.

Furthermore, if we keep analysing the Turkish model, we find some facts that support the later affirmation. Thus, 2012 Turkey has changed to adapt to European demands, consequently the role of the Armed Forces as guardians of the Constitution, and therefore of laicism, has virtually disappeared⁽²⁾. At the same time, the parliamentary majority of AKP has enabled the Parliament to undertake the judicial power reform, with the purpose of making it more independent from political power (also a European requirement), but that has also implied that this judicial power has less ability to act when limiting political parties. And what all these changes have allowed is an AKP that is increasingly abandoning its initial moderation before antigovernment strands and lay nationalism, which in turn translates into a Turkish society that is subtly approaching towards a more practicing and militant Islamism⁽³⁾. In this sense, it results illustrative to collect the statements made by Seymen Atasoy, from the Eastern Mediterranean University in Northern Cyprus, who considers that “a review of democratization in Turkey also illustrates the significant problems the country has yet to solve for the consolidation of genuine liberal democracy. Rather than a completed model for other countries to emulate, Turkey is an illustrative case of ongoing democratization from which other Muslim-majority nations can draw lessons”

(<http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/turkish-example-model-change-middle-east>). Yet in spite of the above, what cannot be ignored is that Turkey has achieved the existence of a considerable equilibrium between different ideologies, and that these remain within the limits imposed by that equilibrium, since framed in values such as free market economy and the democratic functioning of institutions. This equilibrium, no matter how fragile it may sometimes appear to be, does not exist in the environment of the Arab countries that are building a new model of state.

3. Turkish Interest in the Export of the Model

Regarding Turkey and the question is if as a country is interested in exporting its own model, neither this issue seems very defined.

² It should be remembered that today some 140 thousand military officers (between active and retired) are in jail accused of different actions against the political power. This way not only the participations in the pseudo-coup of February 1997 are being refined, but also the involvement with the alleged coup network Ergenekon.

³ In 2008 the Constitutional Court attempted unsuccessfully to outlaw the AKP party for its attempt to push the Islamic law (the veil issue). The only thing the high tribunal achieved was to cut by half the public funds to which the party was entitled, as a warning. This episode has been another example of the existent tension between laicism and Islamism in Turkey, and which has already been mentioned in other parts of this document.

Turkish foreign policy has been characterised since Atatürk's time by what he defined as "peace at home, peace in the world", statement that current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu, has varied towards what he has determined as "zero problems". Turkey has always slid between its eastern and western duality under this idea, even if "Occidentalism" had primed since the times of Kemal. However, in recent times different circumstances (mainly the persistent refusals or barriers to entry into the European Union, the accession of Cyprus to the Union, and the Arab springs) have caused that without forgetting its western commitments, Turkey has modified its foreign policy to focus on its immediate environment. This orientation had already been defended by Davutoglu in *Strategic Depth*, a book republished in 2011, in which in addition of showing himself proud of the Ottoman past, he said that Turkey had lost important opportunities by moving beyond what had been its traditional environment, that is, the Middle East. And that seems to be the orientation in recent times, with a shift that some have denominated as "neo-ottomanism" and which aims not for territorial expansion, but to export something more than products. That is culture, lifestyle, as well as political and financial assistance. With the objective to recover in this way the region's leading role, which according to Davutoglu, Turkey had lost while focusing on its western flank.

As Nora Fisher Onar, professor of International Relations at Bahçeşehir University in Istanbul published in an article entitled *Turkey Inc.: Rethinking the Model's Regional Role*: "we should also acknowledge the sensitivities that arise from the Ottoman legacy. Some believe that Ankara seeks to reclaim its historical leadership of the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Balkans, something that can rub interlocutors the wrong way. Hence, Turkish foreign policy makers' reluctance to employ Ottoman's frames of reference. But at the domestic social level, there remains a growing receptiveness to self-depiction as the benign heir to the Ottoman Empire. This is evident in the proliferation of cultural commodities that employ Ottoman referents, such as the recent record-grossing film *Conquest 1453* about what western historiography calls the 'fall' of Constantinople. In the film, Mehmet the Conqueror—played by an actor who bears a remarkable resemblance to a young Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—is shown to be a forceful and compassionate protector of Muslims and Christians alike (though there is no mention of Jews). The image of Turkey as a 'big brother' to downtrodden Muslims in places like Palestine, Nagorno-Karabagh, Kosovo, and Bosnia—characterizes an emerging "neo-Ottomanist" national image that seems to drive Turkish aspirations of regional leadership within the country and amplify Erdoğan's profile abroad"

In line with the matter mentioned above, it is also interesting to seek the views of Aaron Stein, researcher at the Center for Economic and Foreign Policy Studies in Istanbul, published in the daily *Today's Zaman*, who considers that "to his credit, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has made it clear that his party is not interested in exporting its model but stands ready to help if asked. Despite the prime minister's clear message, the Turkish model narrative has taken hold and the viability of its export is still debated"

4. Consequences for the West

The consequences the new neo-ottoman policy may bring for the West are not clear either. At the moment, the Turkish foreign policy keeps its eastern and western fronts perfectly separated and takes care of both with a pragmatism close to the most pure form of *realpolitik*. The risk is that the Turkish feeling of frustration towards the entry of its country to the European Union may grow ever greater as to provoke an eastward shift in the future policy at the expense of western interests. And here emerges, once again, the Kurd issue, since it remains as one of the aspects that separates Turks from Americans the most, due to the support that according to Turkish interpretation, people from United States bring to Kurd aspirations. A priori does not seem that this new Turkish foreign policy will imply the abandonment of any of its "two faces", which would translate into a major problem for the West, nevertheless a factor remains in this complex structure that might disestablish the region: Israel. Using everyday language, it might be said that for a long time the only friend that Israel has had in the Middle East has been Turkey. And with the latest events this friendship is getting colder, however, the necessary steps for their distancing began to develop since the 2009 Davos Summit, when Peres and Erdoğan publicly confronted each other. A few months later (May 2010) the incidents of the so called "Freedom ships" marked the beginning of the rupture between the two states. Not only did Ankara expel its Israel Ambassador, it also announced the end of the defence collaboration between both countries. In addition, Turkey claimed that the Jewish state had to publicly (and financially) apologise. In short, Israel's increasingly vulnerability and isolated position might become a problem of unpredictable effects that may affect the West.

5. The Arab Countries' Opinion

At another level, it is time to analyse if the Turkish model is what the new political regimes emerging from the Arab spring really want. And for this case, although there is contradictory information, if facts are taken together we might question if behind the positive words and admiration to Turkey because of its economical development, its political system and even the compliments said to the Prime Minister, situations which have already found its way repeatedly into the media, underlies the idea that these countries want to walk towards a Turkish model, or towards another unique model, more Islamised and therefore not secular: yet this does not mean they must have a country like Iran as only reference of an Islamist state. Here are some concrete facts. In September 2011 the company Gallup made public the results of a poll carried out in Egypt in which people were asked about the country they considered as a possible political model to be followed, in case they were able to foresee such a possibility. From that survey's results Mohammed S. Younis published the past April 2 in the *Hurriyet Daily News* an article entitled "Turkish delight? The feasibility of the 'Turkish model' for Egypt", where echoing the presented data, he comments that only "eleven percent of Egyptians cited Turkey as a political model for Egypt's future government. On the other hand, twice as many – 22 percent – Egyptians see Saudi Arabia as a model for Egypt's political transition. More than half of Egyptians said 'none' or refused to answer the question altogether".

For the author to conclude that "a wholesale import of any system is not an appetizing proposition to most Egyptians eager to craft an Egyptian model". That Egyptians are referring to Saudi Arabia as a potential model to follow is not something trivial, beyond Saudi political regime, it should be recalled that many analysts have "warned" about the possible reaction this country may have if Turkey insists in becoming the most important regional power. On the other hand, the previous figures seem to dissent with the results of another study conducted in November 2011 by the University of Maryland in the United States, in which five countries (Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, Jordan and Arab Emirates) were asked about the same topic. According to this poll's result, 50% of the surveyed people opted for the Turkish model, hence Turkey stood as the main model to follow for these countries. Based in these data, Jana Jarbour published in *Telos* magazine, the very same month, an article entitled "Arab revolutions seen by the Arabs" in which she concluded "Turkey is definitely the winner of these events: 50% of people surveyed in five countries consider that Turkey has 'played the more constructive' in the Arab spring. His Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the subject of great admiration compared to other regional and global leaders: most Arabs would like and the future looks like Egyptian President Turkish leader. Also, the Egyptian people interviewed seem strongly attracted by the 'Turkish political model', since the majority (44%) of them hope their new political system is similar to the Turkish system rather than to other Arab and Western systems" (Translation from the French, original language of the article. Even if the population's opinion is important, particularly given the main role they have had in the revolutionary processes recently occurred, it does not seem that states are currently walking in the direction marked by the history of Turkish politics.

6. Recapitulation

In the light of recent events, the possibility for the Turkish model to be exported to other Arab states that have leaded riots in the context of the Arab spring, seems increasingly difficult to achieve. There are a series of factors present in Turkey and absent in the rest of the countries that obstruct the success of this transposition. Consider, for example, the significant impetus that has implied the Turkish desire of integration to the European Union for the assumption of a series of reforms. Relations of privilege, eminently of economic nature and also political at a secondary level, that Turkey has traditionally maintained with the European Union (since the 1960s) do not have an equivalent or similar in any of the cited Arab states. And that takes us to highlight an additional difference, economy. Not only the Turkish economic growth of the latest year (many analysts situate this country among the second round of the BRICS), but also the undeniable existence of a market economy, the high level of industrialization (in comparison to Arab countries' economies) as well as the non-dependence on oil incomes for the economy's growth, place Turkey in a very different position to that of the countries that are potential recipients of its political model. The viability of the model's transposition could only be successful in a country such as Tunisia, the one with the most number of shared similarities. Both have an educated and liberal population, with not many inequalities and low poverty rates. Moreover, both have had secular Constitutions and in both countries the role of the army has not been subordinated to civil power. Similarly, neither of them has radical Islamist movements within their territory.

In fact, the moderate Islamist Al Nahda party that won in the first post-revolution elections in Tunisia openly expressed its admiration for the “Turkish model” represented by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a pious Muslim. In a similar form expresses Abdel Bari Atwan, editor of the *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* daily based in London: “The AKP has become a sort of guide for the Islamist parties... they want to imitate it after seeing how it has transformed Turkey into the 17th biggest economic power in the world with growth rates that would make Europe green with envy”.

Beyond statements, we insist on the idea that the current role of Turkey in the zone looks closer to that of an arbitrator and regional power than to the exporter of a political model. In addition, Turkish foreign policy in recent times seems to go in this direction, encouraging trading and political relations with its neighbours (elimination of visa requirements, for instance), introducing itself in a business way in those countries, convening bilateral meetings, participating in infrastructure construction or offering itself as mediator in case of conflicts. All of these without forgetting that this policy is not exempt of risks for them, since the neo-ottomanism confronts not only with the broader nationalism and kemalism, but also with a crucial problem for Turks, such as the Kurd aspirations, given that in addition this people is not only present in Turkey but it is also in Iran, Iraq and Syria, which makes it an important challenge for the future.

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