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Shaping Turkey's Future Discourse: Political Islam or Civil Islam?

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Synopsis

The current political impasse in Turkey has brought to light the contest between political Islam represented by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and civil Islam embodied by the Hizmet movement inspired by Turkish imam and philosopher Fethullah Gülen. The outcome will have significant impact on Turkey and the larger Muslim world.

Commentary

SCHOLARS OF political Islam have long asked whether Islam is compatible with democracy. Those who believed that Islam is compatible with democracy gained ground in the mid-2000s due to the perceived success of the Turkish democratic experiment. Turkey, led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Islamist party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), is proof that democracy can co-exist with an Islamist political principle.

In his foreign policy, Erdogan's reputation as a Muslim statesman was sealed when he supported the Arab Spring uprisings that saw the removal of authoritarian regimes in North Africa. Despite these remarkable achievements, Erdogan is now facing unprecedented opposition due to his growing authoritarian tendencies.

Threatening Turkish democracy

Erdogan's anti-democratic tendencies could be traced back to the last election which saw the Turkish government eradicating the secular opposition to the AKP in the military and civil service through a series of heavy-handed actions. In 2007 the appointment of his close ally and former foreign minister, Abdullah Gul, as president effectively marginalised the secular forces in the country given that the president makes several key appointments within the civil service.

Erdogan's hard ball politics became evident in the crackdown against protesters opposed to plans to convert Istanbul's historic Gezi Park into a shopping mall and residential complex. The police crackdown that ensued saw six protesters killed and many others severely injured. Since then, the prime minister has trained his guns on the *Hizmet* movement, a community of pious Muslims who sees Gülen as its spiritual leader.

Erdogan's attack on the *Hizmet* began with the decision to close down preparatory schools that assist high school students prepare for university entrance examinations. Erdogan became embroiled in a corruption

scandal that has ensnared dozens of his political allies including former Interior Minister Muammer Guler and his son Bilal Erdogan. Referring to the arrest as an attempt to undermine his government, he moved swiftly to shift almost 500 police officers, including the head of the Istanbul police department.

Erdogan accused supporters of Gülen in the police and judiciary of trying to force him from power and creating what he calls a "parallel state" within the bureaucracy. Indeed this accusation seems odd given the fact that many in the *hizmet* community have long been supportive of the AKP government. Also the *hizmet* movement has focused its work on education and inter-faith activities.

Fethullah Gülen and the rise of Civil Islam

Recent media portrayal of Gülen as a major political force seeking a revolution in Turkey is far from accurate. Gülen has long championed interfaith dialogue and is best known for his work in promoting education which has seen his followers building networks of schools and universities that operate in more than 100 countries. Gülen's Islamic credentials, immense influence and students who are spread worldwide made his thinking important and relevant.

Gülen advocates that "Islam does not propose a certain unchangeable form of government or attempt to shape it. Instead, Islam establishes fundamental principles that orient a government's general character, leaving it to the people to choose the type and form of government according to time and circumstances".

Gülen's position on secularism, the role of religion in state affairs and his attitude towards democracy have been referred to by Turkish political scientist Ihsan Yilmaz as representing a variant of Islamic thought which he described as 'Civil Islam'. Yilmaz argued that Civil Islam is an understanding which is open to dialogue and compromise, dislikes top-down social engineering, is critically engaged with modernity and focuses on spirituality, worship, charity and social action. Most importantly, key tenets of Civil Islam promoted by Gülen include the respect for rule of law and democracy.

While he is not known for making political statements, in a recent interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Gülen lamented the reversal of democratic progress by the AKP government in the last two years. In sum, the supposed conflict between Erdogan and Gülen is in fact a contestation between Islamism and Civil Islam in which the *hizmet* movement has stated categorically their commitment to a free and sustainable democracy in which the rule of law reigns supreme while the ruling AKP has used law and democracy as vehicles for its own goals, thereby revealing contempt for the democratic process.

As Mustafa Akyol, a leading Turkish journalist noted, Gülen's followers have always valued Turkey's relations with the West and championed accession to the European Union. Their hope is not an 'Islamic state', but an Islam-friendly democratic state, under which their faith-focused work can flourish with civil means. Civil Islam as advocated by Gülen is also dedicated towards countering the ideologies of radical Islamists and promoting the Islamic message of tolerance, dialogue and moderation.

Implications for Turkey and the Muslim World

While giving strength to the arguments put forth by some students of political Islam about the incompatibility between Islamism and democracy, the turmoil in Turkey has also reinforced how the odds are stacked against a real democratic Muslim World. Secular authoritarian governments will refer to the Turkish example as the lack of respect of Islamists for democracy.

For Islamist political parties that are currently moderating their position such as the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) and the Indonesian Prosperity Justice Party (PKS), the deformation of democracy by the AKP will result in suspicions about the actual intentions of these parties.

The adage 'one man, one vote, one time' implying that Islamist parties seek elections only to impose an Islamic order through force will once again be used by opponents of Islamism to draw suspicions towards the actual intentions of these parties. The AKP example has shown the difficulties of Islamist parties to respect democratic norms that run contrary to their ingrained belief of the need to impose their beliefs.

Is it time for the Muslim world to shift from political Islam to the more inclusionary Civil Islam advocated by the *hizmet* movement?

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