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## THE MULTIVOCALITY OF TURKISH POLITICAL ISLAM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE COUNTRY'S DEMOCRATIZATION

### ABSTRACT

The last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginnings of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have witnessed a global resurgence of religion and an increase of its influence on politics worldwide. Therefore, political scientists have started to try to assess the influence of the religious factor on the democratization processes, both in democratizing countries and in established democracies. Several points of view have been put forward, regarding religion as a factor hindering democratization, distinguishing between democracy-friendly and democracy-hostile religions, or regarding every religious tradition as a multivocal corpus of different messages, which can be interpreted in the political field both in pro-democratic and in anti-democratic terms. This contribution adopts this latter point of view in its analysis of the influence of political Islam on Turkey's democratization processes. Particularly, it shows that political Islam has favoured democratization processes whenever its leaders have not refused social and political pluralism, while it has obstructed such processes when its leaders were unable to emancipate themselves from religious organizations and from the bulk of their Islamist social base, which has left their commitment divided between them and democratic ideals.

### Key words

multivocality, political theology, Welfare Party, AKP

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## Introduction

The relation between religion and democracy has been a source of discussion and disagreement since the birth of contemporary representative democratic systems. Already in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the loyalty of immigrants from Europe to the American democracy was questioned by many on the grounds of the alleged “double loyalty” of Catholics to their country and to the papacy. On the other hand, several 19<sup>th</sup>-century social scientists, following Max Weber’s thesis on the influence of Protestantism on the development of capitalism, celebrated the compatibility of this religious tradition with modernity and democracy. However, mainstream political science, especially after World War II, has been deeply influenced by the so-called secularization paradigm, which prescribed that religion should irrevocably fade by utterly disappearing or becoming a merely private fact. This point of view has been challenged in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by a phenomenon of global resurgence of religion within all major religious traditions. This resurgence, appropriately labelled as “revenge of God” by a French scholar Gilles Kepel (Kepel, 1991), moreover implied a process of de-privatization (or re-publicization) of religions (Casanova, 1994), claiming a role in international relations and in the domestic affairs of many countries throughout the world. On the one hand, religiously-inspired political parties and politicians have risen in many cases to prominent offices; on the other hand, religious issues have often become (especially after the end of the Cold War) part of the public debate in several contexts. However, it was only after the 9/11 attacks that a more comprehensive analysis of the problem was carried out, particularly with huge and lively debate about the compatibility between Islamic and democratic values. The debate was revived by new arguments after the beginning of the wave of protests in the MENA region and had led countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Libya to undertake regime-change processes. This paper will test the main hypotheses on religion (particularly Islam) and democratization by addressing the case of Turkey, which is perhaps the main Muslim-majority democratic state in the contemporary world. After an introductory section reviewing the main theoretical perspectives on religion and democratization, the text will analyze the cases of the two main pro-Islamic parties active in Turkish politics in the latest decades: the Welfare Party in the 1980s and 1990s and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the 2000s and 2010s. The comparison of the two cases

will show that political Islam favoured democratization processes whenever its leaders did not refuse social and political pluralism, while it obstructed them when its leaders were unable to emancipate from religious organizations and from the bulk of the Islamist social base, dividing their commitment between them and the democratic ideals.

## 1. Religion and Democratization: The State of the Art

The perspective adopted by most classical literature about democratization rarely viewed religion as an influence on democratization. Most works relied instead on other kinds of variables, such as socio-economic factors or relations among social classes (Boix & Stokes, 2003; Huntington, 1991; Lipset, 1960; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Moore, 1966). Most of these authors shared the point of view known as the “secularization paradigm” and regarded religion as a factor hindering socio-economic development and consequently, the transition to and the consolidation of democracy. Particularly, this strand of literature is commonly referred to as “Western exceptionalism” and regards democracy as fully developed only in Europe and the Anglo-Saxon countries because of their success in completing the process of secularization.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, some religious actors started to actively engage in the democratization processes, leading certain scholars to take into account the possibility that the religious influence on democratization is not necessarily negative. However, their works mostly agreed on the essentialist idea that every religious tradition entails an almost unchangeable set of beliefs, rules and images of society (or, at least, some core beliefs) that can be favourable or unfavourable to democracy. At first, they mostly focused on Protestantism, which is regarded as particularly pro-democratic (Bruce, 2004); however, after the pro-democratic shift of the Catholic Church in the 1960s, this perspective widened to focus on the whole of Western Christianity (see for example Huntington (1997)). This positive evaluation does not regard Eastern Orthodoxy, which many believe to be marked by an authoritarian tradition and a quietist orientation (Stepan, 2000), Buddhism (Harris, 1999) or Confucianism (Fukuyama, 1995).

The focus of most of the debate about religion and democracy in the last decade has been on Islam. Scholars particularly highlight its following features: insistence on God’s sovereignty, which makes it difficult to effectively delegate power to the people and delegitimize secular rulers; an allegedly insufficient separation between religion and the state; and the difficulty in adapting Islamic law

to the evolution of society due to an old interpretive tradition based on a method called *naskh* that repeals the more progressive and democracy-friendly Mecca verses (promulgating non-compulsion and freedom of choice and religion) in favour of the later, much more conservative, Medina verses (An-Na'im, 1996; Lewis, 1991; Sachedina, 2001).

Islam has thus become the focus of a thesis of negative exceptionalism that is apparently also supported by empirical data, related to the scarcity and quality of democracy in Muslim-majority countries (Lakoff 2004) as well as in states with a sizeable Muslim minority (Anckar, 2011). This thesis is opposed by those who contend that the scarcity of democracy in the Muslim world is due to other factors, not related to religion: social traditions, the underdevelopment of civil society, and the legacy of colonialism. Therefore they theorize an Arab (rather than Muslim) exceptionalism (Stepan & Robertson, 2004).

Most defensive elaborations on Islam<sup>1</sup> are focused on its multivocality, an idea which is based on another, more recent strand of literature on religion and democratization. According to this perspective, the attitudes shown by any religion in relation to politics (and particularly democracy) can change when one takes into account different local contexts and even different periods within the same context (Stepan, 2000). Unlike Huntington's essentialism, the idea behind the concept of multivocality is that 'any religion is far from monolithic and that all religions require interpretation to give them meaning in a given context' (Minkenberg, 2007, p. 896; Norris & Inglehart, 2004).

The multivocality of religious traditions can be fruitfully linked to the concept of political theology, defined by Daniel Philpott (2007) as 'a set of ideas that a religious body holds about legitimate political authority'. Philpott highlights the possibility of multiple interpretations of religious law since 'some planks of a political theology may be shared within a religion' while 'others[]by only certain communities and factions', and points out that political theologies can change and evolve since they are influenced 'by ancient, formative teachings, but also by historical development and by the circumstances of time and place', and by the activity of intellectuals and ideologues (pp. 507–8). This idea has been developed in relation to the Muslim world by scholars such as Asef Bayat (2007), following the conviction that 'national cultures, historical experiences, political trajectories, as well as class affiliation, have often produced different cultures

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Moussalli (2003), Campanini (1999), and Sachedina (2001), who focus on Islamic concepts such as *shura* (consultation) and *ijma* (consensus) and the possibility to change the *naskh* interpretive method.

and sub-cultures of Islam, religious perceptions and practices across and within different Muslim nations'. According to the author, it is the social actors who 'render a religion inclusive or exclusive, mono-vocal or pluralist, democratic or authoritarian': an ability 'closely linked to a group's capacity to mobilize consensus around their truth' (pp. 7–12). The role of religious actors in elaborating political theologies and in mobilizing people around their projects – and the responses of state institutions and other political actors – seems therefore to represent the crucial factor to determine the impact of a religious tradition on democratization processes in a specific context.

## 2. Turkish Islamists in Power: The Welfare Party

For many decades, the relation between religion and democracy in the Republic of Turkey was dominated by a positivist point of view, which was translated by the Kemalist regime into very strict secularist reforms. Religion was able to take a new role in politics only in the 1970s and the 1980s with the rise of the Islamist movement and the partial relaxation of state secularism rules after the 1980 military coup.

The Welfare (Refah) Party was indeed created in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup but did not become a relevant political force until the mid-1990s, when it managed to win both the local elections of 1994 and the parliamentary ones the following year. As a consequence, its leader Erbakan was able to lead the government between 1996 and 1997.

The party was marked by a strong demand for social justice, which aimed at appeasing the millions of displaced and dispossessed people who had emigrated from rural areas to the urban peripheries. This message was codified in the so-called "just economic order" doctrine, which since 1990 became the main slogan of the party. This heterogeneous ideology tried to propose a third way between capitalism and socialism, with implicit references to the Islamic tradition of social justice. Accordingly, the party enforced massive welfare activities, which flourished in a social background in which most left-wing organizations had been eradicated by the 1980 military coup (White, 2002; Yıldız, 2003). This activity was made possible by a capillary organization in which activists (each one charged with the control of about 75 people in his neighbourhood) were on the one hand responsible for reporting the people's needs, and on the other had to regularly keep updated a count of the votes for the party in their area (Shankland, 1999; Zarcone, 2004). Women (usually veiled) were also included in this

impressive organization, although in separate branches, and with little opportunities for upward mobility. They indeed played an essential role in reaching the female constituency, which was often off-limits for male activists (White, 2002). The creation of this huge organization was also important because it marked the independence of the party from the networks of the Sufi brotherhoods from which it had originated. This situation put Erbakan in a position allowing him to actually compete with religious leaders to define the identity of the Islamist activist (Yavuz, 2003).

The party's ideology, despite the disguise necessary to formally comply with the laws about secularism in political parties, proposed strong references to a cultural identity described in "new Ottoman" terms. In the domestic field, this meant proposals including the liberalization of religious symbols such as the headscarf (which also became the trademark for women involved in the Islamist movement), the widening of the religion's role in education, and a re-evaluation of the Ottoman past (mostly downplayed by Kemalists, who had relied on the ancient pre-Islamic past in order to build a narrative about the roots of the Turkish Republic) in public events, toponymy and language. Erbakan proposed a political system based on the institutions of the Ottoman empire (such as a pluri-legal system based on the Ottoman *millet*, which allowed every religious community to retain its own private law), with the state simply seen as a referee which should grant mutual respect among communities (White, 2002; Zarcone, 2004).

At the international level, the party strongly opposed both the US and the European Union, which were regarded as dominated by materialism and willing to exploit the Muslim world under the mask of protection of human rights. The Welfare party was fiercely against Turkey's integration into the EU, which was defined either as a 'Christian club' or as a 'Zionist-dominated organization' (Özdalga, 2002). It proposed instead the creation of a common market of the Islamic world, whose embryo became the D-8, a new international organization including only Muslim-majority countries. A strong opposition to "Zionism" and specifically to Israel's policies regarding the Palestinians was celebrated every year on "Jerusalem day", with massive rallies, sometimes also calling for the adoption of *sharia* as state law (Yavuz, 2003).

Such positions were clearly disapproved of by the secular institutions and by the Army, which reacted on 28 February 1997 by issuing a memorandum asking for a decisive change in several crucial sectors of policy, mainly regarding domestic secularism and the orientation of Turkey's foreign policy. This event (which was later labelled by some scholars as a "post-modern coup" or

“coup by memorandum”), determined the fall of the Erbakan government. The Welfare Party was also banned by the Constitutional Court (which took the same decision against a new Islamist party, the Virtue Party, in 1999). A new coalition government, not including pro-Islamic forces, implemented most of the recommendations of the military. This event contributed to precipitating the country’s fall into a deep political and economic crisis in the following years, but it was also crucial to catalyze a change already occurring within the Islamist movement by accelerating the separation between the old guard connected to Erbakan, and the young guard, whose leaders created the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2001 and which gained a massive and unexpected victory in the parliamentary elections the following year.

### **3. The AKP: A Tsunami in Turkish Politics**

This event was described as an earthquake or a tsunami in the Turkish political system, not only because of the Islamic identity of the party but also the sheer proportions of its electoral victory, which gave it an absolute parliamentary majority (Çarkoğlu, 2002; Ozel, 2003). This breakthrough was attributed to several factors: the ongoing economic crisis, widespread corruption in the political establishment and consequent negative reputation of the traditional parties, the perception of the new party and its leadership as persecuted outsiders, and the changes in Turkey’s social profile (particularly with the rise of a new Islamic bourgeoisie) (Yavuz, 2006). The AKP was in fact not simply a new Islamist party, basing its strength on the cultural struggle against the West and the Kemalist version of secularism. This fact was proved by the inclusion in its ranks of several conservative politicians coming from other centre-right parties. Compared to the traditional Islamist position, its political platform was innovative in several respects but mostly in its promotion of free-trade economics and of Turkey’s integration with the EU (features reminiscent of Özal’s rather than Erbakan’s stance). The new government proved that such statements were not empty rhetoric by engaging in unprecedented reformatory activity directed at Turkey entering into negotiations with the EU (which was indeed achieved in 2004). The economy was further liberalized (promoting a massive growth of the country’s GDP in the following decade), human rights (also regarding the Kurdish minority) were enhanced, and the influence of the military on the political system was curbed, while even on the Cyprus issue the new government made substantial concessions by accepting the Annan plan (Yavuz, 2009).



The most important feature of the party's ideology is its refusal of every descriptive religious connotation in favour of the self-definition of a "conservative party". This term, which can imply quite different conceptions (Huntington, 1957) has a peculiar meaning in the Turkish context. On the one hand, it is connected to traditional values, to an idea of morality defined in religious terms, and to a patriarchal idea of family and society. On the other hand, it highlights the concept of *hizmet* (providing social services), which means a focus on pragmatism rather than on ideology. Such attitude is particularly strong in Prime Minister Erdoğan, who spent many years of his political education as an elected official at the local level. An idea widespread among the party leaders is that the party can be regarded as a sort of supermarket within which people with different ideas can coexist (it is not surprising therefore that the AKP leadership sometimes compares their party to the US Republican Party) (Yavuz, 2009).

Since the AKP's rise to power, religion has been the main divisive issue in the political debate, given the diffidence of the secular forces about the real intentions of the Erdoğan government (accused of hiding a "secret agenda" aiming at Islamization of the country). Therefore every attempt to modify the law on sensitive issues has given rise to inflamed debates and even threats of intervention by the military: for example, when Erdoğan proposed to criminalize adultery; when he explicitly accused Israel of state terrorism against the Palestinians; and when his government tried to change the rules about the headscarf ban at the universities. Behind such controversies are two utterly different conceptions of rights: while the AKP leadership highlights the need for religious freedom of the Turkish believers, the secular forces are worried about the possibility that changes in the laws and in the constitutional clauses about secularism might promote discriminations against secularly-oriented people (women in particular).

The struggle between the pro-Islamic and the secular forces flared up in 2007, when the AKP tried to elect Abdullah Gül, a former Islamist, to the Presidency of the Republic. The controversies created by this event gave rise to a very polarized debate and to massive demonstrations held by both sides; this ultimately brought the country to new elections. A new, indisputable victory of the AKP and the resulting election of Gül to the Presidency did not stop the confrontation between the government and the military – which, however, entered a new phase of stalemate.

While in domestic affairs nearly all attempts to promote religiously-oriented policies have been stopped, according to some observers a pro-Islamic bias of the Erdoğan government became increasingly evident in the foreign policy domain, especially in the second half of the decade, once the negative attitude



of important EU states towards Turkey's full integration became more explicit (Yavuz, 2009). This change, mirrored not only by critical statements against Israel but also by a more positive attitude towards anti-Western states such as Iran, was institutionalized in 2009 with the rise to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ahmet Davutoğlu, an academic well known for his conception of an identity-based neo-Ottoman foreign policy (Duran, 2006). In the domestic field, in the 2010s the government enacted some debated laws, such as the liberalization of the veil at the universities, the reform of public education, and the limitations on alcohol consumption, and was widely criticized both for incarceration of dozens of journalists and the crackdown on the Gezi Park demonstrations.

### Some Concluding Remarks

This cursory analysis of recent Turkish political history in relation to the role of religion seems to confirm the validity of the multivocality thesis, and to prove wrong both the positivist theses (according to which religion always proves negative for democracy) and the essentialist ones (according to which a specific religious tradition entails an immutable set of core beliefs and values, and therefore its impact on democracy is predetermined and unchangeable). Indeed, the comparison between the two main pro-Islamic political actors in recent Turkish history seems to demonstrate that when religious values are associated to a fundamentalist political ideology, and the role of political leaders is confused with that of religious leaders, their impact on democracy can be negative; this is the case of Erbakan's Welfare Party, but might also partially be the case of the Justice and Development Party after its authoritarian turn which, according to many observers, started in 2009–10. On the other hand, when religious values are included in a pluralist and tolerant political theology, religion can have a positive influence on democratization by enhancing the respect of minorities' rights and the pluralism of a society. This is clearly the case of the early Justice and Development Party which – at least until 2008–9 – was able to play a positive role in Turkish politics and society by enhancing personal freedoms, supranational integration and economic growth.

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