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Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Early Political Career: Islamism as Political Ideology

Furkan Çay*

Abstract

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is a longest-standing leader of Turkey and left his mark on Turkish politics. During his early political career and thereafter, he exploited Islam to gain greater power. In this realm, Islam became a political ideology within his power. Previous studies over Erdoğan’s distinctive Islamism did not use the framework of Islamism as a political ideology. Therefore, extant studies remain insufficient concerning the impact of Islamism on his worldview and policies. This article examines the brief Islamism in Turkey and Erdoğan’s political career with the framework of Islamism as political ideology.

Keywords: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan; Islamism; Political Ideology; Turkish Islamism; Exploitation

Introduction

Islamism is a very much debated term and used by scholars to define various political regimes ranging from Egypt and Saudi Arabia to Turkey to Iran. However, Islamist leaders in such political regimes do not resemble the exact characteristics. What they have in common lies in their aim to seek power and govern the country through their Islamist ideology. In this realm, Islam is exploited as political ideology to gain and remain in the power. In political Islam studies, it became very popular to address Egypt whereas Turkey is often disregarded. As Turkey became the first Muslim-majority country to allow Islamists to become part of the government, its importance in studies over political Islam is beyond doubt (Hamid 2004). Hence, this study aims to scrutinize Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s political career from the framework of Islamism as a political ideology. The reason behind this is that among other Islamists, Erdoğan has long been regarded as exploiting Islam for achieving supreme power. He familiarized with Islam through his high school years in National Outlook (Millî Görüş) and aftermath, he has heavily used Islamism as a political ideology to grab and consolidate the power at all costs. As Erdoğan came to the power with AKP (Justice and Development Party), his Islamist ambitions grew.

This article thus will seek answer to two main questions; first is what role Islamism as a political ideology had in Erdoğan’s worldview, while second question is how Erdoğan

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adopted social conservatism while claiming to abandon anti-Western and anti-Israeli Islamist rhetoric? Consequently, answers to these questions will be sought with more details. Concerning the structure of the article, the first section provides the theoretical framework of Islamism. The second section reveals the overview of Islamism in Turkey while the third section seeks the traces of Islamism in Erdoğan’s early political career. The fourth section explores Erdoğan’s rise in the 1980s and 1990s, whereas the fifth section focuses upon his change of rhetoric from Islamism to conservatism. The last section demonstrates the influence of Islamism on Erdoğan’s recent political career.

Theoretical Framework over Islamism

Islamism became extensively used over last few decades in many areas including academia, politics, and the media. However, despite the extensive usage, scholars could not come to an agreement on what constitute Islamism. The part of the problem indeed stems from the fact that Islamism refers to different political actors and movements (Mozaffari 2007: 17). For example, political regimes stretching from Saudi Arabia and Turkey to Iran, and Indonesia are all classified as Islamist, however, due to distinct political, cultural, and societal structures, they display striking differences. Therefore, context specificity gains importance when we aim to analyse Islamism in the given country (Ayoob 2004: 1; Hamid 2011: 42).

Islamism indeed does not have a long history and its emergence as political doctrine dates back to the post-colonization period. As Muslim countries were incapable of delivering better economic conditions and political freedoms, Islamism began to draw attention in the political sphere. For example, in Egypt, between 1950 and 1970, Islamism gained great visibility as the Egyptian government turned violent against Islamist movements. While adopting the discourse over morality and “human rights”, the legitimacy of Islamism enlarged and the ideas of Sayyid Qutb (1906-66), an ideologue of Muslim Brotherhood, became very popular (Ayoob 2004: 3; Demant 2006: 98). Similarly, when the Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923, Islam was taken under control of the state and followers became subject to suppression by the Kemalist regime (Gülap 2002: 23). While displaying themselves as victims of Kemalism, followers of Islam did not form any ideological Islamist party to challenge Kemalism straight away. However, when National Order Party (Milli Nizam Partisi, MNP) was launched by Necmettin Erbakan in 1970, the status quo began to change at the expense of Kemalism.

In contemporary politics, Islamism is practiced in various Muslim countries, particularly Egypt, Pakistan, and Tunisia. What they have in common today perhaps lies in their approach to religion: “anti-Western”, “anti-secular”, and “anti-modern”. Such approach is ensured by two core events: first is forced colonization. As colonization dissolved the social bonds and forced to change the societies, it caused anti-Western sentiments. The second is a feeling of inferiority. As Muslim societies felt inferior against the West, anti-modern sentiments unfolded. Islamism, therefore, was considered an excellent substitute to Western ideologies (Demant 2006: 89-98).

Moreover, Islamism is heavily influenced by three significant ideologues: Pakistani Abu al-Ala al-Mawdudi, Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, and Iranian Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.
In their writings and speeches, they propagated that society should be organized based upon ‘God’s rule.’ Bringing Muslims into such a “religious community” therefore became their main aim. For example, Qutb’s idea was to return to the heydays of Islam because the current political system was a new ‘Jahiliya’ (ignorance). He thought that instead of following the Western style of governance, Muslim societies should create “their own isolated religious utopia”. Likewise, Abu al-Ala al-Mawdudi’s ideas can be summarized on five principles: “anti-apology, anti-Westernism, literalism, politicization, and universalism”. Anti-apology claims that Islam is the true word of God, thus it does not need external validation while Literalism states that the word of God should be taken literally. If human beings cannot grasp the holy text, it is because of the ‘limited capacity of human reason. Whereas Universalism asserts that Islam is a universal religion and there is no problem with converting people into Islam (Demant 2006: 94-101).

Islamists’ overarching aim indeed lies in the Islamization of society. They believe that if society becomes Islamic, the state will follow it inevitably. Therefore, Islamism differentiates from radical Islamism and fundamentalism due to such ideologies aim to change the “social order” from above and fight with the state itself (Bayat 2013: 5). Whereas Islamism follows the salafiyyya which is based on “Quran, Sunna, and Sharia”. In Islamism, what matters is the “social and political action”. Going to the mosque alone in this regard is not sufficient. In their viewpoint, there is even a difference between Muslim and Islamic. Muslim is the person who believes in Islam but Islamic is more about “structures and foundation” of the state (Roy 1994: 35-36).

Islamist approach to the practice of Sharia follows a similar trend. They do not insist on a sharia-based country. Islamization of the entire society indeed has more significance for them. Thus, the Islamist approach to affairs of women and sharia can be considered moderate compared to fundamentalists and radical Islamists. For example, Islamists give more space to women in terms of participation in political and social affairs. Even during the Iranian revolution (1979), it was not a matter of heating debates whether women can vote (Roy 1994: 38-39). Furthermore, to better understand Islamism, first, we need to understand Islam. Islam is a monotheistic religion and provides its teachings through the holy book, Quran. It has total 114 chapters (Surats) and can be divided into two-phase. First is the Mecca period, stretching from 610 to 622, while the second is the Medina period, covering from 622 to 632. In the first phase, Quran urges Muslims to avoid excessiveness and promotes acceptance. Whereas, in the second phase, rule, authority and combat are the main concerns of the Quran. Due to unclear messages of chapters, Muslims are divided over which phase to believe. While some believes the first phase, Islamists refer to the Medina period (Mozaffari 2007: 21-2). Due to such choice of Islamists, Mozaffari claims that Islamism is “a religious ideology with a holistic interpretation of Islam whose final aim is the conquest of the world by all means” (2007: 21). This study views Islam as a political ideology in the hands of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The reason behind this lies in his aim to seek power, authority, and government at all costs. Thus, this study claims that Erdoğan practices Islam as a political ideology.
Overview of Islamism in Turkey

In the early period of the Turkish Republic, ruling elites had a concern over the construction of national identity. As Turkey consisted of various ethnic groups, the unification of people was a very difficult task. Nevertheless, for the sake of a politically stable and viable country, ruling elites agreed on the construction of a modern “Turkish nation”. Indeed, such construction opted out of the Ottoman heritage of Islam while replacing it with Westernization. As an example, the caliphate ended in 1924 and was followed by the deportation of the Ottoman dynasty. Aftermath, the provision stating “religion of the state is Islam” is abolished with the amendment of the 1924 Constitution. That is to say, laïcité introduced in the Turkish state.

The de-Islamization of the state increased during the 1930s as the origins of the entire civilizations addressed to Central Asia, origins of the Turks, rather than the Islamic past. These acts were indeed seen as a replacement of Islam with nationalization and Westernization. Hence it has outraged the Islamists as Islam lost its final source of legitimacy to “nation” and modernity (Gülalp 2002: 28-9). However, despite the great efforts, we cannot claim that modernization and Westernization imposed by the Kemalist regime gained ground across the country. The places where adopted Kemalist modernization efforts were only cities, whereas the countryside continued to preserve its traditional way of life and resisted modernization. The reason behind this perhaps lies in the demographic situation of Turkey as the greater part of the population was composed of peasantry until the 1950s (Gülalp 2002: 33).

As World War II came to an end, Turkish political elites (i.e., İsmet İnönü) initiated the liberalization of the regime intending to gain the sympathy of the victors. Hence, Turkey introduced multi-party elections in 1946. However, the general election taken place amid open vote and secret count overshadowed the reliability of the polls (Akandere 2010). Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) remained in power, but it could not prevent Democrat Party (Demokrat Parti, DP) to gain seats in the parliament. Aftermath, DP continued its rise and became the victor of the 1950 general election. While DP became the direct speaker of the masses with Islamist rhetoric against Kemalist modernization attempts, military intervention in 1960 put an end to DP’s government. Leader of the party Adnan Menderes alongside Fatin Rüştü Zorlu and Hasan Polatkan were executed in the following year (Cay 2019: 92-7).

Following the military intervention, the constitution introduced in 1961 brought a wide range of freedoms including the provision of great political space and mitigation of party formation. Thus, over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, many parties founded and among others, MNP became the first party to define itself as the Islamist party (Rabasa and Larrabee 2008: 35-7). Accordingly, it became representative of political Islam while entering parliament in 1970. The MNP indeed aimed to bring many changes to Turkish society including the establishment of the Islamic economy, conversion of the Turkish legal system to sharia law, and transformation of Turkish social life into a more Islamic manner. The leader of the party, Necmettin Erbakan, coming from National Outlook Movement, considered the centre of civilization lies in Ottoman past and Islamic geography where the majority of the population are Muslims. He even assumed that Western technological origins
date back to the peak of Islam “between the 7th and 14th centuries”. Hence, he proposed modernization through Islam with an aim to replace Kemalist secular modernization (Gülalp 2002: 30-1). Nonetheless, the existence of the party did not last long and in 1971, it was shut down due to anti-secular activities.

Erbakan nevertheless did not give a break over his political activities while founding National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi, MSP) in 1971. MSP followed the same Islamist ideology where Islam occupies the centre of civilization. In 1973, CHP surprisingly formed a coalition with MSP and in a brief time, significant events occurred. For example, when the cultivation of opium was allowed, it strained relations between the USA and Turkey while the American government imposed a military embargo. On the other hand, Turkish military operation to Cyprus began due to conflict between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots. As Turkey invaded the North part of the Island, MSP became very popular across the country. However, even victory over Cyprus did not solve the issues between CHP and MSP as the coalition came to an end after few months (Fedayi 2012: 499-502).

In the following years, MSP was involved in other coalitions. In 1975, it became part of the Nationalist Front (I. Milliyetçi Cephe) while in 1977, served in II. National Front (II. Milliyetçi Cephe). Nevertheless, it shared the same destiny with its predecessor and shut down after 1980 military intervention. Erbakan and his party fellows were banned for ten years and could not join political affairs. However, Welfare Party (Refah Partisi, RP), founded in 1983, continued its activities with the same Islamist ideology even though Erbakan and his banned fellows were not present in the party (Rabasa and Larrabae 2008: 40-2).

Over the course of the early 1980s, amid the absence of Erbakan, the Turkish political establishment was not challenged by any Islamist movement. However, when the referendum in 1987 abolished the ban of politicians and allowed Erbakan to return to political life, the struggle between Erbakan and the Kemalist establishment began once again. While taking the leadership of RP, Erbakan continued to propagate an anti-secular worldview. His worldview based on the certain rejection of Western-oriented modernism and “nostalgia” to Ottoman Empire indeed increased the existing concerns (Gülalp 2002: 32).

Amid a massive crisis of the Turkish political system during the early 1990s, RP gained a considerable power. For example, in the 1994 local election, it received 19 percent of the total vote share and won 28 municipalities including Istanbul and Ankara while in the 1995 general election, the party came first with 21.6 percent of total votes. Accordingly, it formed a coalition with True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi, DYP). Indeed, it was very appalling for the Kemalist establishment simply because, since the foundation of the Republic, any ideological Islamist party which impose a direct challenge to the state could not rule the country (Rabasa and Larrabae 2008: 42). Hence Erbakan was given a “list of recommendations” to stop anti-secular activities on 28 February 1997. He nevertheless could not follow the recommendations and resigned in June 1997. His RP shared the same destiny as its predecessors and shut down the following year. Political activities of Erbakan and his fellows were once again banned, but this time, it was for five years (Rabasa and Larrabae 2008: 44).

The “February 28 Process” has revealed that Islamist parties can come to power however they cannot exploit it as they desire. Hence, Islamist parties needed to change their
overall strategy to ease the pressure from the Kemalist establishment. When Islamists returned to the political arena in 1997 with the newly established party, Felicity Party (Fazilet Partisi, FP), two opposite groups confronted each other: traditionalists (gelenekçiler), initiated by Erbakan and Recai Kutan, and reformists (reformcular) led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül. While traditionalists insisted to preserve the existing position of the party, reformists sought to change the party's stance over West, modernization, and human rights. Accordingly, traditionalists continued their political life under Virtue Party (Saadet Partisi, SP) whereas reformists founded Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) on 14 August 2001 (Rabasa and Larrabae 2008: 45). AKP nevertheless did not adopt an anti-Western stance rather it followed cooperation with the Kemalist establishment and deepening relations with the West. Hence it defined itself as a conservative Democratic Party rather than a mere Islamist party (Rabasa and Larrabae 2008: 44-7; Soós 2016: 98).

**Islamism in Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Early Political Career**

Over the course 1950s, Turkey has experienced a mass influx of immigrants from the countryside to cities. Istanbul received many immigrants and became the hub of immigration. Ahmet Erdoğan, born in Rize, the city of the Black Sea region, arrived in Istanbul at age 13. Aftermath, he settled in Istanbul while having two marriages, two children from first and three children from his second wife. When his second wife gave birth to a baby boy in 1954, Ahmet wanted to name him as his father, Tayyip. Because he was born in the month of Recep, one of the three holy months in Islam, he became Recep Tayyip (Çakır and Çalmuk 2001).

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan spent his childhood in the neighbourhood of Kasımpaşa, Beyoğlu district of Istanbul. His father worked in state Maritime Agency as captain and raised him with strict authority. Due to economic difficulties in the family, young Erdoğan became a street vendor selling “lemon”, “spices”, and “drinking water” among others (Heper and Toktaş 2003). Meanwhile, he familiarised Islam and after graduation from Piyale Paşa Primary School, decided to continue his studies at Istanbul Religious Vocational High School (Cagaptay 2017). Indeed, he became very productive in his high school years by involving in many activities such as reciting poems and playing football. Poetry competitions in particular developed his oratory skills (Çakır and Çalmuk 2001).

During the 1970s, young Erdoğan became a member of the National Turkish Student’s Association (Millî Türk Talebe Birlüğü, MTTB) and stepped into politics. In 1976, he was elected MSP head of Beyoğlu Youth Branch, and following year, he became a president of the MSP Istanbul branch (Cagaptay 2017: 49). While organizing the events for MSP, he was delivering the message of Islam to the masses. Hence, his peers began to call him “fighter of Islam” (Çakır and Çalmuk 2001: 30). Alongside the Islamic rhetoric, anti-Kemalism was also visible in his speeches. He noticed that Kemalist modernization attempts did not have value among the people whereas populism with an Islamic tone is highly appreciated. He thus gained a reputation with his Islamist populist rhetoric (Yılmaz 2021: 7).
Putting a great emphasis on Islam in his life and speeches became a well-known policy of young Erdoğan. For example, in 1980, during the 527th anniversary of the conquest of Istanbul, MSP Istanbul Youth Branch organized an event where Erdoğan had an opportunity to hold a speech. He addressed the “faith and jihad” as main components of life while associating the participants as following:

You are soldiers of this future conquest movement. Most of your names are Ahmet, Mehmet. These are the names of that great being. That great being, which is the prophet of the prophets. But what a mess! Aren’t you all Mehmetçik when necessary? (Çakır and Çalmuk 2001: 31)

The newspaper Sebil covered his speech and put his words under his picture as following:

We are a saviour generation. Our case is not a case of dry fighting and congregation, as the guardian of our states, Osman Gazi, has bequeathed to all future generations in the recovery of his son Orhan Gazi. It is the cause of spreading the religion of Allah and making his judgment victorious. The first motto of this case is peace and goodness. Do not expect the rescue of the homeland children who have fallen into anarchy because they are unaware of Islam today, from the official forces that have not inclined to the right yet. You are the generation who will save them as well as the one who dies and kills. By learning Islam well, living perfectly and communicating it wisely and beautifully, you will ensure the victory of truth and truth (Çakır and Çalmuk 2001: 31).

Furthermore, to understand the importance of Islam in Erdoğan’s life, one should analyse his association with movements (cemaats). He was part of the Iskender Pasa Movement, a branch of Nakşibendi, and participated in many chats (sohbets). Therefore, he was deeply influenced by their teachings and advice. Even after 1980 military intervention, when MSP was shut down alongside the other political parties and banned for 10 years from political activities, Erbakan, Erdoğan, and other fellows continued their chats. Such chats indeed laid particular attention to “faith” (iman), “patience” (sabr), and “jihad” (Çakır and Çalmuk 2001: 49-50).

In 1983, the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi, RP) was founded, and National Outlook returned to the political arena. However, amid the absence of Erbakan, young fellows took the lead and climbed the steps. Erdoğan, for example, became head of Beyoğlu District Branch in 1984 and the following year, he was elected provincial chairman of Istanbul (Heper and Toktaş 2003: 160-61). He indeed owes this immediate success to several events including visiting homes and interacting with the people directly through small chats. In such chats, he talked about “Zionism” and placed particular emphasis on the national values of the Turkish nation. While giving an example of Japan as a story of success, he stressed that Japan did not expose to Westernization during the industrialization process. He indeed expected a similar story from Turkey and said that “superstitious mentalities will collapse in the world, and it will be replaced by the right. A representative will receive national consciousness and RP will come” (Çakır and Çalmuk 2001: 56).
Indeed, with an intention to come to power, RP members were working very well in Istanbul. According to Erbakan, they were “Jihad lovers” (Çakır and Çalmuk 2001: 53). On this matter, Çakır and Çalmuk argue that:

Everybody, regardless of time and place, would fulfil their duty properly, regardless of day or night. The most important message given to them was the act of jihad. The most important teaching of jihad was also shahada. Party members who gave their time, energy and money for the struggle had to give their lives when necessary. Each member of the RP also became a volunteer for shahada (2001: 53).

Moreover, in 1986, Erdoğan became a nominee for Member of Parliament while lost the election. Later, in 1989, he became a nominee for Mayor of Istanbul but came second. RP nevertheless went to Supreme Election Council (Yüksek Seçim Kurulu, YSK) for alleged irregularities but YSK turned down the request. As a result, Erdoğan told to the judge that “you cannot make a decision with a drunken mind”. Thus, he was imprisoned for a week (Çakır and Çalmuk 2001: 60).

**Erdoğan’s Rise: RP Years**

Over the course of the 1990s, RP continued to expand its vote share. For instance, in the 1991 general election its vote share increased to 17 percent whereas it was 7.2 percent in 1987 (Çarkoğlu and Bilgili 2010: 407). Meanwhile, Erdoğan, despite the loss in previous elections, was prominently determined to grasp the power. In 1993, he unfolded his intention by saying that “the target is power, by Allah’s permission and with the support of all our people”. However, the top brass of RP was not pleased with his ambitions. They were concerned that if Erdoğan gains power once, he will surely demand more (Çakır and Çalmuk 2001: 67). As RP gained confidence after the 1991 general election, it began preparing for the upcoming election. However, when 1994 local elections approached, it was dragged into a debate concerning who will be its candidate of Istanbul. Indeed, Erdoğan’s name was among the nominees whereas party leaders were highly displeased to see his name. Nevertheless, as polls demonstrated that Erdoğan comes first among others, Erbakan announced his candidacy on 15 January 1994. Erdoğan immediately began for election campaigns and chose his slogan as “ok with Allah’s willing” (Çakır and Çalmuk 2001: 67).

On March 27, 1994, Erdoğan was elected mayor of Istanbul and gave early signals that Islam will be his main guide. In the first meeting held in the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality building, he wanted to say a prayer of Al-Fātihah, the first chapter of the Quran, instead of holding a moment of silence for Atatürk. He received a reaction from the Kemalist establishment and Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor’s Office launched an investigation. In response, Erdoğan said that:

Our Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality has many elders who have come to this day, who have contributed and served here. At the same time, our country has many elders who have served in the past. I invite our deceased elders and all our deceased
past who served the municipality throughout history to read a Fatiha. The greatest gift to be sent, especially Atatürk, is a Fatiha (Takvim 2021).

Besides, he has made several controversial decisions during his post. He decided to quit the “cloud seeding” method and replace it with rain prayer. He said that “rain prayer in Anatolia has always yielded a positive result” (Yolculuk 2021). Later, he banned the sale of alcohol in Istanbul municipality buildings. Party base also demanded to open Hagia Sophia for Muslim worship and build a mosque in the middle of Taksim square of Istanbul however such demands were met with great suspicion from the Kemalist establishment (Çakır and Çalmuk 2001: 67). Erdoğan indeed owed his bold decisions to trust stems from the groups with lower socio-economic backgrounds. Particularly, the reallocation of “municipal funds” gave him a reputation that he is a supporter of “poor neighbourhoods”. However, he once again drew the criticism from the Kemalist establishment in terms of his reallocation of funds (Baykal 2009: 4).

Indeed, Erdoğan’s reputation kept pace with RP’s rising popularity among Anatolian masses. In 1995, RP received 21 percent of the vote share and shortly after, Erbakan became prime minister of the collation formed with True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi, DYP). Previously Erbakan was part of coalitions in the 1970s though it was the first time he became a senior partner of the coalition. It was shocking for the Kemalist establishment as they did not know whether Erbakan would keep his previous promises during his incumbency. He was an anti-Israeli, anti-Western, and pro-Islamist leader. He even previously declared that “shall never become lackeys of the Christians. We shall establish an Islamic union” (Hamid 2004: 114).

During his post between 1996 and 1997, Erbakan aimed to create the institutions among others; “Islamic NATO and Islamic Common Market”. Hence, he aimed to reorient Turkish foreign policy to Islamic nations rather than the West as the centre of civilization. When he was forced to resign on 18 June 1997, his term came to an end. However, it was time for Erdoğan who learned his lesson and would go cautiously to the power (Hamid 2004: 114-15). After the February 28 process, the RP lost its power though it was still strong in local administrations. Hence, Erdoğan began to act as leader of the party by participating in party events beyond Istanbul and accordingly became an “open speaker” of the party. He was indeed displeased by the Erbakan government’s timidity against the military and claimed that Erbakan’s government did not stand firm (Çakır and Çalmuk 2001: 84). Hence, he was determined to bypass Erbakan to condemn the military’s recent activities. In his visit to Siirt, the Eastern city of Turkey in December 1997, he gave a speech and addressed the pressure of political Islam as following:

There is no freedom of expression in Turkey ... our reference is Islam. They can never digest us. Even Western people have freedom of belief. Why cannot it be respected in Turkey? Minarets are our bayonets, domes are our helmets, and mosques are our barracks. Nobody will be able to silence the call to prayer. We will surely end to racial discrimination in Turkey. Because RP do not agree with other parties ... they tried every possible way to prevent RP coming to power. But no power could prevent this (Hurriyet 2021).
His speech drew heavy criticism from the media, military, and Kemalist establishment. Aftermath, Diyarbakir State Security Court (Devlet Güvenlik Mahkemesi, DGM) launched an investigation and convicted him for ten-month imprisonment (Çakır and Çalmuk 2001: 85-6). However, later his imprisonment was lowered to four months. While opening some facilities in Istanbul, he stated his discontentment with such decision and said that “I am not destroyed, I am standing tall. This song will not end. I will rest for four months” (Hurriyet 2021).

After his verdict, he left his post of Istanbul mayor and went to prison to serve four months between March and July 1999 (Baykal 2009: 5). During his imprisonment, he used the prison as his “barracks” while gaining significant strength and energy (Çakır and Çalmuk 2001). After he left the prison, the change of his political stance was very visible. He no longer aligned himself with Erbakan’s radical and anti-western fellows. He claimed that “he did not take seriously people who talked about a state founded on sharia”. In 1999, at a business dinner he said that “we are not going to get anywhere with radicalism” (Karaveli 2016: 123).

After February 28 process, the Turkish bourgeoisie shied away from National Outlook due to concern that risks are greater than the benefits. Hence, the fraction in the party, represented by reformists was a great option for the Turkish bourgeois (Özsel et al. 2013: 555-56). Reformists indeed were representing a modernist version of Islam and seen more compatible with world order rather than Erbakan’s just order (adil düzen) policy which stands against capitalism. When AKP was founded in 2001, it became a “politically correct” option for the Turkish bourgeoisie (Özsel et al. 2013: 556).

Erdoğan in Power: Change of Rhetoric

During AKP’s foundation, Erdoğan was still subject of the ban from the political affairs. Hence, Abdullah Gül and Bülent Arınç took the leadership of AKP amid the discussions over what ideological stance party represents. As AKP’s founding fathers came from anti-Western, anti-Israeli and pro-Islamist National Outlook legacy, many experts assumed that it would follow the similar Islamist ideology. Unpredictably, it adopted social conservatism and free market economy while committing itself for EU accessions negotiations, human rights, and freedom of speech (Rabasa and Larrabae 2008: 55; Yılmaz 2015: 84).

The AKP top brass claimed that they no longer represent Erbakan’s National Outlook. For example, Ali Babacan, State Minister of AKP, stated that “my party is conservative and democratic. We are not Islamists. We do not want an Islamic state. We defend the family, traditions, but we are like a conservative democratic party governed by European criteria” (Milliyet 2021). Having said that, the AKP downplayed the role of Islam and presented itself as successor of Adnan Menderes’ DP and Turgut Özal’s Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi, Anap). Hence, it desired to place itself in centre-right rather than radical Islamist parties (Yılmaz 2015: 86).

The timing of AKP’s foundation indeed coincided with 2001 massive currency crisis which caused a mass unemployment and loss of value in Turkish lira. Amid the negative opinions toward existing political parties, the AKP won 34.3 percent of total vote share in general election taken place in November 2002 (Keyman 2012: 5-6). While forming the
government, Gül occupied the highest position of prime minister. However, few months later as judiciary lifted ban over Erdoğan and re-election taken place, he gave his post to Erdoğan (Yilmaz 2021: 9). In his first term, 2002-2007, Erdoğan was very cautious not to repeat the same mistakes of Erbakan. Hence, “political survival” became his main aim (Cagaptay 2017: 91). Meanwhile, he was under heavy scrutiny of Kemalist establishment and in an aim to distract, he tactically avoided anti-Western discourse and sought support of international allies including EU and USA (Yilmaz et al. 2017). Due to brief enthusiasm over EU accession negotiations and democracy, he was even considered champion of democracy in the West. Many political analysts believed that National Outlook legacy no longer occupies a significant place in his worldview. Particularly, when USA supported Erdoğan due partly to American administration needed allies of moderate Islam over fundamentalism, his legitimacy boosted (Özsel et al. 2013: 558).

Indeed, we cannot understand Erdoğan’s adoption of pro-EU policies and liberal discourse without considering of his intention over expansion the party base. As the support of Islamists was no longer seen sufficient to remain in the power, Erdoğan had to convince other segments of the society, particularly liberals and Kurds (Özsel et al 2013: 557). However, Kemalist establishment reacted to such immediate change in rhetoric and insisted over his hidden Islamist agenda. While addressing Erdoğan’s speech held in 1996 as following: “democracy is not an end, but only a means”, they criticized EU membership process and liberal discourse as “window dressing” (Rabasa and Larrabae 2008: 55). Meanwhile, the struggle between the AKP and Kemalist establishment continued, and several events brought them very close to clash. For example, Erdoğan’s intention to remove the ban and allow the scarf wearing women to enter universities freely was one of them. There were concerns that the AKP aims to take over educational institutions and transform the society into more Islamist manner. Another conflict occurred when AKP aimed to open a way for Imam Hatip School graduates to enter any university. Previously, Imam Hatip graduates could only become “imam” or “preacher”, however Erdoğan objected to such cause and aimed change it (Dinçşahi 2012: 621-22).

Moreover, Türk claims that if we aim to track the Islamism in Erdoğan’s worldview, we should take a closer look at his relationship with Middle East. Erdoğan assumes that possible peace in Middle East will certainly bring peace to the world. In his viewpoint, problems of Palestine, Egypt, Iraq, and Tunisia are the problems of Turkey. Hence, he sees role of Turkey as “restore the peace” and bring welfare to Middle East (Türk 2018: 333-34). In an aim to bring his intentions into reality, between 2002 and 2007, he particularly approached to Syria and Iran. For example, with Syria, AKP had more than thirty “ministerial-level” visits while trade between two countries boosted and various agreements signed in the areas including gas and oil. Similarly, in December 2002, Turkey signed an educational cooperation with Iran where students from both countries can participate in exchange programs. It was indeed surprising because Turkey is regarded secular while Iran is a theocratic country (Cagaptay 2017: 100).

Despite the early enthusiasm over pro-democracy and human rights, Erdoğan’s rhetoric has changed from 2007 on. As he consolidated his power, the legacy of National Outlook became more visible in his speeches. While unfolding his intentions to raise a more pious generation, he intended to “Islamicise Turkish society”. Such intentions supported by
idealized past of Ottoman Empire with references to glories of caliphate and Sultanate. After 2016 coup attempt, it was followed by adoption of National Outlook’s anti-Western discourse based on Christians against Muslims (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018: 1822-23). Having said that, Islamism as political ideology is heavily practiced by Erdoğan.

Islamism in Erdoğan’s Recent Political Career

A major shift in Erdoğan’s policies indeed derives from two core events: the outbreak of Arab Spring in 2010 and the achievement of the highest vote share in the 2011 general election. Firstly, when Arab uprisings began, Erdoğan’s enthusiasm was very noticeable because, in the short time frame, Muslim Brotherhood came to power in Egypt and Tunisia. Thus, he considered the growing power of the Muslim Brotherhood as an opportunity for Turkey to play a greater role in the Middle East. He thought that Turkey can use its good reputation to guide the Middle Eastern countries (Cagaptay 2020: 183-84). Soner Cagaptay argues that:

He seems to believe that only political Islamist parties represent the ‘true children of the land’, other factions being shaped by, and representing ‘foreign’ ideologies, Erdoğan was, therefore, convinced (and maybe still believes) that in Arab countries, the Ikhwan-related parties will sooner or later repeat his AKP’s success in Turkey, finally coming to power in various Arab capitals (2020: 185).

Secondly, when AKP reached 49.83 percent vote share in 2011, AKP top brass thought that it is the right time to correct the past mistakes of the Kemalist regime. In their mind-set, it was a return to normality as Turkish society consists of Muslims and needs Muslim governance. They even called it “justice” whereas seculars called it “revenge” (Hamid 2016: 173). As Erdoğan gained “hegemony” over Turkish politics, taking over the public institutions and transforming it from inside by placing AKP loyalists became his main aim (Soós 2015: 37). Gradually, institutions among others; media, police, military, and judiciary were taken over. Later, Erdoğan turned his attention to education however, unlike the Kemalist civilizational project (based on secularism and modernization), his goal was to raise a “pious generation” which aims to transform the society to culturally more conservative. Ihsan Yilmaz argues that the reason behind the raise of the pious generation is to ensure loyalty to the rule of Erdoğan and AKP. With an aim to succeed, he worked on various issues ranging from removal of headscarf ban from the schools and ease of pressure on Imam Hatip Schools to permit the students from fifth grade to use headscarf. Indeed, disloyalty to such pious generation project bring consequences such as criminalization and demonization as “traitors or infidels” (2018: 4-7).

Afterwards, Erdoğan expressed his commitment to raising pious generation many times. For example, in 2012, in his statement against Republican and People’s Party (CHP) leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu’s “religion merchant” accusation, he said that:

Do you expect the AK Party, which has a party identity, to raise an atheist generation? It may be your job. But we do not have such an aim. We will raise a
generation that is conservative and democrat, protecting the values, principles and historical principles of its nation and country. We are working for that (Bianet 2012).

As his remarks gained attention and found controversial in Turkish media, he carried on the debate and stated that:

I call out to those who have been writing in their columns for a week; Do you want this youth to be a thinner user? Do you want this youth to be a rebellious generation? Do you want this youth to be a generation detached from its national and moral values, without any direction or problem? We cannot agree with you here, but when we say, 'a modern generation', can't a religious generation be contemporary? Is it not possible to be both contemporary and religious? Gentlemen, first bow your head and think about how a modern and religious generation was raised. A religious generation respects freedoms: A religious generation also respects different ideas and belief groups. We are a generation that has been brought up with that upbringing... (Radikal 2012).

Despite Erdoğan acting in a more Islamic manner and expressing his opinions about the pious generation, scholars perceived him Muslim Democrat until 2013 (Yilmaz et al 2017: 49). Indeed, two major events (Gezi Park Protests and the 17/25 November corruption scandal in 2013), changed the opinions of many scholars. When Erdoğan unprecedentedly responded to protesters and purged the judiciary and police forces after corruption scandals unfolded, scholars agreed that his democrat term came to an end. Later, his victory in the 2014 Presidential elections and the 2016 failed coup attempt strengthened his authoritarianism while gaining total control across the country (Yilmaz et al 2017: 49).

Erdoğan’s pursue of the Islamist agenda can be seen in the national education system. It is indeed a very controversial matter in Turkey as each government attempted to use it to “construct ideal citizens”. Throughout his governance, Islamic-oriented education gained strength while secular education gradually weakened. For example, the length of philosophy classes lowered while political science classes remained the same intending to mobilize students for politics (Yilmaz 2018: 11-12). In 2017, the length of religion and ethics classes increased from one hour to two hours while biology classes lowered from three hours to two hours. (Bianet 2017). Another controversial decision came in 2017 when the Board of Education announced that evolution classes will no longer be taught in Turkish schools because the subject of evolution is still controversial (The Guardian 2017).

Foreign policy has been another field that reflects Erdoğan’s Islamist policies. Turkish foreign policy shifted from pro-Western to Neo-Ottomanist when Ahmet Davutoglu was appointed minister of foreign affairs in 2009. The new administration set a goal to increase the focus on previous ottoman lands including the Balkans, Central Asia, Caucasus, and the Middle East. (Trifkovic 2011: 83). M. Hakan Yavuz argues that Turkish foreign policy has three stages: “The first stage is Europeanization and the Market-Led Foreign Policy (2002–2010). In this phase, Erdoğan’s government focused on ‘zero problems with neighbouring countries’ and EU accession negotiations. The second phase is ‘the Arab Spring and Islamization of Foreign Policy (2010–2013)’ During this phase, Erdoğan’s relations with the
Western leaders became sour. He noticed that due to differences in culture and religious matters, Turkey does not have a future in the EU. Thus, he reoriented his focus into Muslim countries. Yavuz argues that this phase is the beginning of Neo-Ottomanism however Erdoğan is not directly responsible for such cause because despite he had good intentions toward the EU, he did not get approval from EU countries. The third phase is “today: The collapse of Turkey’s unrealistic foreign policy, and the ‘splendid Isolation’ (from 2013 to Present)”. After Gezi Park protests, his authoritarian tendencies unfolded, and became more “Islamo-Turkish nationalist”. During this phase, the relations between Turkey and the West worsened and Turkey approached historical rival Russia (2020: 188-199).

Conclusion

Since his early career, Erdoğan believes in supremacy of Islam and necessity of Islamist government. Adopting anti-Western, anti-modernist and anti-Israeli stance thus intensified his confidence that power and final authority in Turkey should only belong to Islamists rather than Kemalists. Initially, as Kemalist establishment kept an eye on him, he was required to change his rhetoric over Islamism while replacing it with social-conservatism and market economy. To relax the pressure, he even committed for EU accession negotiations and promoted human rights and freedom of speech however, such rhetoric did not last long as he began to consolidate his power. Today, he does not fear to express his desires for raising Islamist generation and brilliance of Ottoman caliphate. Therefore, such desires can be seen as reflection of his main aim to expand his power through Islamism.

I have discussed the political career of Erdoğan with a framework of Islamism as political ideology. The findings I have presented suggest that Erdoğan has been a leader who heavily uses Islamism as political ideology. This study revealed that his particular Islamism derives from his adolescence years as he was very enthusiastic follower of National Outlook. Even his previous parties were shut down several times by Constitutional Court of Turkey; he did not distract himself from achieving the supreme power. Therefore, it is no surprise that after coming power with AKP, maintenance of his authority at whatever cost became his main goal. As a result of conducting this research, I suggest that Erdoğan’s current Islamist political stance cannot be understood without a detailed investigation of his early political career. While this comprehensive study does not offer a conclusive answer to the question of how Islamism as ideology plays in Erdoğan’s politics, it certainly raises important questions and encourages further research in the field.

Notes

1. Neo-Ottomanism is indeed a set of characteristics including imagined past and the increasing role of religion in the state. “Make Turkey great again” is the ideal catchphrase of neo-Ottomanism. As AKP voters consider the collapse of the Ottoman Empire tragedy, they support the revival of the Ottoman Empire in foreign policy. In this regard, they do
not seek for appeasement but “confrontation”. By taking into account the desire of the public, Erdoğan set his foreign policy based upon Islamic and Ottoman features. With Muslim countries, particularly Palestine and Bosnia, Islam plays a very important role in Erdoğan’s foreign policy. See Yavuz, Hakan (2020) Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism (New York: Oxford University Press).

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