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Turkey, Iran and the Arab Uprisings: The Failure of Political Islam and Post-Ideological Politics

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The Turkish brand of Islamism is well-suited to the post-ideological phase that the Middle East region is entering. It is also confirmation of the view that Olivier Roy enunciated 20-odd years ago: that political Islam has failed to deliver a distinct and coherent ideological programme.

BY DR KATERINA DALACOURA | DECEMBER 11, 2011



■ Islamism in the Arab uprisings of 2011 and the role of the Turkish and Iranian ‘models’.

It has been widely observed that none of the 2011 Arab uprisings were led by Islamists and that they were not pervaded by Islamist slogans and objectives. The uprisings demonstrated, if anything, that the Middle East is entering a post-ideological phase, where patriotism and an introverted, domestically focused politics will dominate.

It goes without saying that each uprising was very different and the roles of Islamist movements in Bahrain, Yemen, Syria and Libya were discrete. However, there were commonalities between Egypt and Tunisia. In Egypt, the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood took a cautious line with regards to the protests, until after it was certain that they were unstoppable (even though many younger members of the organisation took part in the growing protests, ignoring the leadership's instructions). In Tunisia, Nahda was banned so by definition could not take the lead.

Even so, the change of regime in Egypt and Tunisia will benefit the Islamists. As the political process opened up in the weeks following Mubarak's fall the Muslim Brotherhood created a political party, the Freedom and Justice Party, which has already been legalised, alongside the centrist Wasat (which had been denied legal status under Mubarak). Nahda was also legalised in Tunisia. It won 40 per cent of the votes in elections of 23 October. Although in the region as a whole – for instance in Jordan – opinion polls over many years consistently suggest that moderate Islamist parties would secure about 30 per cent of vote, this percentage may increase as a result of the proven ability of the Islamists to organise effectively and the weakness of other parties in this respect.

In Egypt and Tunisia, Islamist movements have declared that they see the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) as a model to be emulated. Saad el Katatni one of the leaders of the Freedom and Justice Party has said so explicitly. Nahda's Rachid Ghannouchi claims the AKP has in fact been influenced by him. Although many different variants of Islamism exist in the Middle East, with regards to what has been termed ‘moderate’ Islamism in the cases of Tunisia and particularly Egypt –



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important trendsetters, especially the latter – the recent Arab uprisings indicate that the Iranian model of Islamism is ‘out’, while the Turkish model is ‘in’.

What does this mean for the prospects of political Islam in the Middle East?

First, that these two Islamist parties, The Muslim Brotherhood/Freedom and Justice and Nahda, accept that they must function within the parameters of a democratic, multi-party system. It is less clear what this desire to emulate the AKP means in terms of secularism. Recep Tayip Erdoğan declared, in a television interview before he visited Cairo in September 2011, that Islamists must accept secularism. This apparently offended some Egyptian Islamists, while I would guess that their Tunisian counterparts are much more comfortable with the idea.

The debate on whether the Turkish AKP can be a model for Islamists in the Arab world is complicated. Some question whether Turkey wants to be a model at all. Others point out that Turkey’s very particular historical evolution does not lend itself to repetition elsewhere. Yet more observers point to the fact that the Turkish ‘model’ is idealised and that Turkey is currently reverting to authoritarianism in many ways. For instance, there are now 58 journalists in prison in Turkey. Researchers and academics, among others, are persecuted and legally prosecuted for expressing their views.

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Published in Political Reflection Magazine (PR) Vol. 2

No. 4

Dr Katerina Dalacoura is a lecturer in international relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science who specializes in



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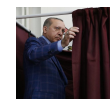
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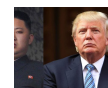
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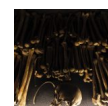
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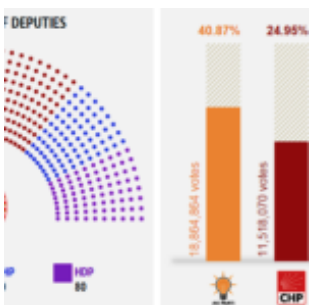
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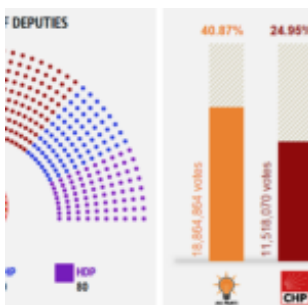
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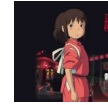
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