

REVIEW ESSAY

From Islamic Renaissance to Neo-fascism in Turkey

Firat Demir
University of Oklahoma

NEŞECAN BALKAN, EROL BALKAN, AND AHMET ÖNCÜ, EDS. *The Neoliberal Landscape and the Rise of Islamist Capital in Turkey*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2015. 314 pages. Cloth US\$95.00 ISBN 978–1782386384.

The *Neoliberal Landscape* is a collection of nine essays exploring the economic, political, social, and historical dynamics behind the rise of Islamic political parties in the Middle East, particularly the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) in Turkey. For scholars studying Turkey and the wider Middle East, understanding the rise of the AKP as well as its internal and external undercurrents has been a challenge. On the one hand, its founding leaders marketed their party as a democratic Islamic party, similar to Christian Democrats in Europe, and claimed to focus their efforts on democratizing Turkey by limiting the military and Kemalist hegemony. To this end, they formed alliances with the liberals and the liberal-left as well as the outward oriented business groups, and used the support of the European Union and the United States as leverage to increase their legitimacy. The AKP's strong neoliberal stance in economic policy also allowed it to win over domestic and international capital to its side. The changing times in global politics were also in the AKP's favor, coinciding with the post-9/11 period when the United States and its allies were desperate to find a liberal and democratic Muslim country with a market economy that they could use as a showcase. The AKP project, however, proved to be short-lived as it has increasingly become authoritarian at home, bordering on neo-fascist, and confrontational abroad. In fact, many analysts have suggested that what Turkey is experiencing is nothing short of a regime change, moving the country from a secular republic, albeit a semi-democratic one, to a neo-fascist one-party state with some Islamic flavor, ruled by a strong-man with no pretense of democracy. In fact, since the 7 June 2015 elections, the country has moved to a de facto presidential system, even without constitutional change.

Since its coming to power in 2002, the AKP has gradually transformed itself into a party-state with no separation of powers between different branches of the government. The judiciary, legislative, and executive branches have been tied to its one-man ruler, President R. T. Erdogan, who, on many occasions, stated his objections to any such separation of powers. In his quest to be the strong man of Turkey, President Erdogan has used all his efforts to create further divisions in the society, and the suppression of individual freedoms, including freedom of press and expression has become the new normal (Economist, 2016; Tugal, 2016; Yesil, 2016). Turkey ranked 151 out of 180 countries in press freedoms in 2016, a free fall from its already low level of 100 in 2002 (RNB 2016). The assault against opposition journalists and media groups, the attacks against opposition parties, and the legally questionable seizures and constant harassment of rival business groups have turned the whole country into a movie set for a badly scripted spaghetti western film. Dozens of journalists have lost their jobs or have been put behind bars for trying to do their jobs, including the editors of leading opposition newspapers (Dundar 2015). Perhaps worse, the opposition newspapers and TV stations themselves have been shut down or seized on shaky legal grounds, moving press freedoms to an all time low (Baydar 2016; BBC 2016; Ellis 2016). Between 2014 and 2015, almost every day someone was indicted on charges of insulting the president. In 2014 and 2015, 92 percent and 81 percent of all tweets withheld globally originated from Turkey. During the second half of 2015, which overlaps with the two general elections, 92 percent of all court-ordered Twitter requests globally came from Turkey (Twitter 2015). In an attempt to remove any last remaining opposition to AKP rule, thousands of academics, and hundreds of intellectuals have faced intimidation, and worse, have been prosecuted for treason and supporting terrorism, while they have continued to be insulted by the President himself on a daily basis (Yeginsu 2016; “Erdoğan’dan” 2016).

At the same time, the civil war with the Kurds has restarted and several Kurdish cities have been put under military curfews (“Turkish” 2015; Letsch 2016). The number of civilian deaths in these Kurdish cities is reported to be in the hundreds (Goksel and Mandiraci 2016). Tens of thousands of children are cut off from schools and there are many reports of a complete breakdown of medical services. More than a quarter of the population in these cities is internally displaced, according to the government’s own reports, numbering over 300,000 people (Letsch 2016). The gruesome images from these cities resemble Dresden after the World War II (“Scenes” 2016).

Abroad, the AKP’s outright support for the civil war in Syria has contributed to one of the worst humanitarian crises in the Middle East and

Europe for the last century and has turned Syria into a failed state. The same is true regarding the AKP government's destabilizing and hostile moves against the Kurds in Syria and Iraq.

Increasing authoritarianism, sectarian domestic and foreign policy, military adventurism, and neo-Ottoman fantasies of the AKP government have brought the country only one step away from a collective suicide, touching every fault line in the country and breaking it into many pieces: Kurds vs. Turks, seculars vs. Islamists, liberals vs. conservatives, Sunnis vs. Alawites, Muslims vs. Christians. In a series of attacks by ISIS and Kurdish terrorist groups, the country has fallen into a spiral of violence. Between January 2015 and April 2016 alone, 21 bombings in multiple cities killed close to 300 people, including 97 people killed in a peace rally in Ankara in October 2015 by an ISIS suicide bombing. And yet, just a day after another ISIS suicide attack in Istanbul's Ataturk Airport in June, 2016, killed 44, the president, prime minister, and the rest of his cabinet were busy taking selfies and jubilating the opening of a bridge in Istanbul, while the parliament was busy passing new laws that would curtail the independence of the judiciary further. In a usual manner, neither the prime minister nor the president, nor any other members of their cabinets, assumed responsibility or resigned from their posts after the attack. Instead, they were busy claiming that there was no security breach at the airport.

In the end, Turkey has become a source of instability in an already unstable region. From once being cited as a rising star and an exemplary democracy for Muslim countries, Turkey is now being remembered as another failed democracy among many others. *Neoliberal Landscape* is an edited collection that analyzes the recent history of Turkey, tracing the footsteps of the rise, and one may argue, the fall of the AKP, and together with it, any last remaining wishes for merging Islamic politics with democracy.

The opening chapter of the book by Burak Gurel offers an introduction to the world of Islamism, its sociopolitical, economical, and historical roots, covering a wide range of countries from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran to Afghanistan and Turkey. The chapter identifies the provincial character of the Islamist movements and ties it to the competition between small and medium sized enterprises and large corporations. Gurel also provides a general discussion of the class dynamics of Islamism and highlights the cultural, economic, and political divisions between the educated urban elites and the conservative and Islamist leaning countryside folks as well as the unemployed/underemployed urban proletariat. Gurel also identifies the lack of a political alternative from the left as a major factor in the rise of the AKP. The violent suppression of the left after the 1980 coup created a void

that was eventually filled by the Islamist groups that, very successfully, sugarcoated their neoliberal and antilabor policies with leftist slogans such as economic and social justice and anti-imperialism (which is mixed with the standard talking points of the Islamists, including anti-Zionism). The rise of charity-based social provision services for a large number of urban poor was instrumental in widening its support base in the cities as the Kemalist and leftist parties failed to respond to the demands and aspirations of the growing number of urban proletariat.

An orthodox Marxist explanation of the causes of the AKP's rise to power is explored in Chapter 2 by Sungur Savran. The chapter explains the rise of AKP based on a deepening rift in the Turkish political economy between and within two fault lines: one, between the dominant Istanbul-based large corporations and the latecomer Anatolian-based small and medium size businesses; and two, between the educated and professional urban workforce and the newly rising provincial and less educated professionals who demand an increasing share of the employment opportunities in public as well as private sector jobs. According to Savran, the sociopolitical and economic conflicts, deeply rooted in class divisions and cemented by the decades-old social engineering project of the Kemalists, help explain the rise of Islamist parties. The chapter is at its best in its analysis of the class roots of the AKP and broader Islamic movements in Turkey. However, the weakest parts of the chapter are in its condescending and reductionist discussion of the reasons behind the liberal-left support for some of the AKP policies during the early 2000s. Savran treats the liberal and liberal left actors of the Turkish intelligentsia as being on the "payroll" of the AKP and accuses them of daydreaming for supporting the AKP during its early phase in the 2000s. Yet, this is also the only chapter in the book that has any discussion of the Kurdish problem and how it relates to the politics of Turkey. However, the discussion of the Kurdish issue is only a brief historical summary and does not include any discussion of how Kurdish political parties reacted to the AKP ascendancy.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 by Kurtar Tanyilmaz, Ozgur Ozturk, and Evren Hosgor, respectively, explore the rise of the Islamic capital in Turkey and its increasingly confrontational and competitive stance with the more secular capitalists that were formed during the Kemalist hegemony in the early years of the republic. In these chapters, Tanyilmaz, Ozturk and Hosgor examine the formation of alliances within two capitalist power blocs, TUSIAD (Turk Sanayicileri ve Isadamlari Dernegi, Turkish Industry and Business Association), representing the more urban and Istanbul-based secular capitalists, and MUSIAD (Mustakil Sanayici ve Isadamlari Dernegi,

Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association), representing the more provincial and conservative new comers, and trace the changing nature of capitalist relations within the Islamic business groups, which have increasingly become larger in size with a monopolistic trend. While highlighting the discontinuities, these three chapters also show the continuities between the Kemalist and the AKP periods including the use of state resources in molding a dependent bourgeoisie, whose existence is reliant on the provision of state resources through various kinds of direct and indirect subsidies.

The issue of hegemony in the legitimization of the AKP rule and its dissemination through Islamic middle classes is taken on in chapter 6 by Erol Balkan and Ahmet Oncu. Using the Gramscian analysis of hegemony and drawing on the work of Bourdieu, Balkan and Oncu offers a sociological analysis of the Islamic middle class in Turkey. The chapter, using the findings of a field survey conducted among middle-class households in Turkey, provides a rare glimpse at the sociopolitical divisions between the Islamic and non-Islamic segments of the society. A major finding of the chapter is the increasing convergence in lifestyles and aspirations of Islamic and non-Islamic middle classes that are shaped by a neoliberal and modern world outlook. If this is indeed the case, we should expect the social-engineering project of the AKP towards creating a more conservative society, fitting an imagined Ottoman and Islamic golden age, to fail, as many others did before. The findings also hint certain clues as to what the opposition parties need to do to provide a credible alternative to the electorate.

Matching the Gramscian theoretical framework used by Balkan and Oncu, chapter 7 by Evren Hosgor offers a class-based analysis of the power blocks that initiated the rise of AKP hegemony, including domestic business groups, Islamic social movements, and international actors, including the European Union and the IMF. The chapter also carefully analyzes the use of Islamic media in creating consent and in reinforcing (as well as inventing) Islamic cultural codes. The hegemonic capture of the state bureaucracy and the judiciary as well as universities from Kemalist loyalists through appointment of pro-AKP cadres are also well exposed. The use of polarization and the divide and conquer strategy that is very successfully adopted by the AKP is also worth mentioning.

Chapter 8 by Joshua D. Hendrick analyzes the rise of the Fethullah Gulen movement in Turkey and offers a field-work based account of the historical and sociopolitical foundations of this international movement that managed to blend globalization with a Turkish-Islamic missionary zeal. Using the Gramscian concept of passive revolution, the chapter provides a reference

point for understanding the dynamics of the rise of the Gulen movement. Written before the fratricide that surfaced in 2013 between the AKP and the Gulen movement, which reached its climax with the failed coup attempt by the Gulenist members of the army in June 2016, however, the chapter misses an opportunity to explore the causes and the effects of this fallout between the two important Islamist currents in Turkish politics. The chapter also fails in providing a critical analysis of the fault lines of this movement that precipitated its final demise. The use and abuse of secretive and clandestine domestic and international networks for power and hegemony, including the Spectre like spread of its tentacles to the judiciary, police, military, government bureaucracy, schools and universities as well as the media is completely ignored in this chapter. Instead, the chapter overestimates the political power and the popular legitimacy of the Gulen movement while underestimating its contributions to the rise of the AKP. After their divorce in 2013, the AKP government has labeled the group as a terrorist organization and has requested from the US the extradition of its founder, Fethullah Gulen. The 17–25 December 2013 corruption scandal that was linked to high level government officials and AKP members, including several ministers, marked the turning point in the power struggle between these two groups and shattered their alliance, resulting in the AKP accusing Gulenists of plotting a coup against the government. In the aftermath of the corruption scandal, thousands of followers of Fethullah Gulen, including its business affiliates as well as government bureaucrats, police officers, judges and public prosecutors have faced a purge leading to their arrest or dismissal. It is perhaps an irony that the purported coup attempt in 2013 became a reality three years later in 2016, resulting in over seventy thousand arrests from the military, the police, judiciary, universities and government bureaucracy as well from the media and private businesses. The failed coup also showed the extents to which the members of this organization are ready to go in their power struggle with their rivals, including other Islamist groups.

The media wars between Kemalists and Islamists to assert their ideological legitimacy within Turkey and beyond are explored in chapter 9 by Anita Ogurlu and Ahmet Oncu. The chapter traces the timeline of increasing authoritarianism and the suppression of dissent in media under AKP rule. Similar to Hendrick's analysis in chapter 8, however, Ogurlu and Oncu are silent on the divisions between different factions of the Islamist media, particularly the AKP vs. Gulen affiliated groups. Likewise, Ogurlu and Oncu are equally silent on the Kemalists' use of similar tactics against any opposition to their hegemony in the pre-AKP period. The chapter, in its focus on Islamist and Kemalist groups, also misses an opportunity to compare these

two groups with others including those by the Kurds and other minorities. The supporters of the Ergenekon trials are also lumped under the Islamist umbrella with no mention of liberal-left or the Kurdish media.

In the empty half of the glass,, the *Neoliberal Landscape and the Rise of Islamist Capital in Turkey* misses an opportunity to start a conversation among various opposition groups that are currently at war with each other including the Kemalists, the nationalist and orthodox Marxist left, the liberal left, and the Kurds. (We might also add splinter Islamist groups, both from within and outside the AKP, to the opposition list as well.) Unfortunately, the last two of these groups—the liberal left and the Kurds—are mostly missing in this edited volume. The restart of the civil war with the Kurds in summer 2015 makes this shortcoming only too obvious. Echoing the written, and perhaps more importantly unwritten discussions in these nine essays, the liberal left in Turkey is being demonized, being accused of facilitating the rise of AKP hegemony while the Kurds are ignored altogether. Surprisingly, Kurdish social and political movements, their exchanges with the Turkish political left, the Islamists and nationalists are missing from the chapters. The book is also silent on the role of Kemalist elites and the military in the rapid ascent to power of the AKP through their refusal to establish strong and independent democratic institutions since the founding days of the republic. The readers are also left to wonder what kind of alternative future different opposition groups envision for Turkey.

Despite its shortcomings, this is a timely book, offering clues as to where Turkey may be heading, particularly after the unsuccessful Gezi Park protests, the corruption scandal of 2013, and the failed coup of 2016. Whether we will remember Gezi park protests as a turning point precipitating the eventual demise of the AKP or marking the final resistance of the largely unorganized and politically passive urban populations, only time can tell. The book also fits in a series of other works that offer a critical analysis of the rise and fall of the AKP years in Turkey, including its two main characteristics that are Islamic politics and neoliberal economics. The works include Coşar and Yücesan-Özdemir (2012), Ahmed and Gunter (2013), Akca et al. (2013), Keyman and Gumuscu (2014), Soyler (2015), Tuğal (2016), and Yesil (2016), which are must reads to accompany the *Neoliberal Landscape*.

Post script: Most of this essay was written before the June 15, 2016 coup attempt by the Fethullah Gulen affiliated members of the military. The developments since then, particularly the purge and arrest of tens of thousands of military and security personnel, bureaucrats, prosecutors, judges, teachers, academics, university deans and presidents, writers and

journalists, and the seizure of business groups, including opposition newspapers and TV stations, on the grounds of being Gulenist or pro-coup further confirmed the views expressed in this paper. Since June 15, the declared state-of-emergency provided all the legal grounds needed by the ruling government to silence any remaining opposition in the country. Yet, the failed coup was also the first of its kind in a country that is too used to such military uprisings since its Ottoman days. This was indeed the first time people went to the streets to stand against a junta and defend their government, and every single party in the parliament stood out against the putschists. The failed coup also made the existing divisions among different Islamist groups more transparent, particularly the ones between the Gulenists and the AKP, who, up until just a few years ago, were strong allies.

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