Varoglu, Bekir, Mark Garnett, and Simon Mabon. "Conservatism in Turkey." *Conservative Moments: Reading Conservative Texts*. Ed. Mark Garnett. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 99–106. Textual Moments in the History of Political Thought. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350001565.ch-013>>.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Conservatism in Turkey

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The Justice and Development Party (AK Party) is a conservative democratic mass party that situates itself at the center of the political spectrum . . .

According to our notion of conservative democracy, the realm of politics is based on a culture of compromise. The articulation of societal differences in the realm of politics can only become possible if politics are founded on a basis of compromise.

Societal and cultural diversity should participate in politics on the foundation of democratic pluralism produced by tolerance and allowance . . . Conservative democracy which is in favor of limited and defined political government views totalitarian and authoritarian approaches as enemies of democratic politics. Conservative democracy values political legitimacy based on the will of the people and the common values of humanity . . .

The concept of the rule of law, albeit couched in Western philosophy, necessitates limiting governments and institutions according to objective rules and laws emanating from universal values . . . Conservative democracy is based on an understanding that favours gradual and phased change over top-down change.

Societal change is the most fundamental and durable form of change. Interrupting socio-economic, cultural and political life is negative as it abrogates accumulated knowledge, experience and historical development . . .

AK Party does not view conservatism as being opposed to change. Rather, it defines conservatism as being opposed to authoritarian and radical change. It has thus completed 'silent revolutions' based on an understanding of gradual change and societal dynamics.¹

When evaluating the principles of any political movement as opposed to individual thinkers, students of ideology almost invariably face the challenge of teasing out the implicit or underlying meanings of texts which have been produced to meet a variety of exigencies. The above excerpt seems to be a notable exception. It makes an explicit ideological claim on behalf of a movement, expounds the principles of that ideology and sets out its practical implications in a specific national context. One is tempted to think that the excerpt needs no further comment in this volume: if you need a concise illustration of conservatism in Turkey, here it is. However, on closer inspection, the passage provides far more questions than answers, and demands an interesting variation in the usual process of ideological analysis.

The excerpt is taken from a document, published in September 2012, entitled *Political Vision of the AK Parti (Justice and Development Party)*, as part of a wide-ranging programme for Turkey in the years running up to the Republic's centenary in 2023. Among the objectives set out by the AK Parti (better known outside Turkey as the AKP) – the ruling party in Turkey since winning a majority in the legislative elections of 2002 – was membership of the European Union (EU), for which the country had originally applied in 1987. In 2012, it was pursuing this goal with greater vigour, and had established links with the EU's main centre-right grouping, the European People's Party (EPP). It was thus no accident that the document quoted earlier advocates a mode of a conservatism which is broadly comparable to that of mainstream European Christian Democratic parties, incorporating several ideas more usually associated with liberal ideology.² It stresses the AKP's commitment to diversity, tolerance and compromise: to the rule of law, and democratic practices 'based on the will of the people and the common values of humanity'.³ The party also advocates 'limited' government, and a free-market economy. However, these objectives are qualified in a fashion which also echoes the approach of Christian Democratic parties, notably the German CDU (see Chapter 12); the AKP document highlights its record on welfare spending, particularly on education, healthcare and housing,

while emphasizing that the state will continue to play a stabilizing role in order to contain the ‘savagery of capitalism’, albeit as ‘a facilitator rather than a force preventing creativity and development’ (AKP, 32–47).

Thus, in its philosophy and its practical programme, the AKP was offering the kind of formula which in most European states would undoubtedly place it on the centre-right, and most commentators in those countries would classify it as a vehicle for modern conservatism. However, while the blend of liberalism and conservatism provided a basis for electoral success and governing competence in Germany and elsewhere, in the Turkish context the inherent tensions in the formula seemed more problematic. Apart from the usual virtues claimed by conservatives – the advocacy of piecemeal rather than radical reform, the emphasis on social cohesion, and the like – the document also promises that the party will rely on ‘accumulated knowledge, experience and historical development’. This sits awkwardly with the endorsement of ‘universal values’ which are acknowledged to derive from ‘Western philosophy’. The attentive reader would be entitled to ask how these abstract concepts would translate into the Turkish context. Five years after the publication of the document, that question was still awaiting an authoritative answer.

Conservatism and ‘Kemalism’

The issue of context prompts a comparison between the AKP’s statement of principle and the ideas of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881–1938), the founder of modern Turkey. As a dynamic movement which claims to promote national unity and purpose, the AKP can certainly be compared to the Republican People’s Party, the vehicle for Ataturk’s rule. In Recep Tayyip Erdogan (b. 1954) – a one-time footballer and former mayor of Istanbul – the AKP also has a charismatic and forceful leader who is often compared to Ataturk.

However, the parallels between the two movements are less instructive than the contrasts. In particular, Ataturk’s answer to the problem of context was a concerted effort to erase any differences between Turkey and liberal democracies in the West. In particular, Ataturk was antipathetic to the religion of Islam – an issue which has played a crucial part in public and private life since the days of the Ottoman Empire. Ataturk was reported to have remarked that ‘I have no religion, and at times I wish all religions at the bottom of the sea.’⁴ Erdogan, by sharp contrast, was brought up as a devout Muslim and became the mayor of Istanbul as the candidate of the Islamic Welfare Party. This organization was subsequently banned by the Turkish Constitutional Court; Erdogan himself was excluded from political life and briefly imprisoned in 1997, after incorporating in one of his speeches lines from a pro-Islamic poem.⁵

A case could be made for incorporating Ataturk himself within a broad tradition of ‘conservative’ governance. On this view, he regarded Islam as not

only an obstacle to the desired modernization of Turkey, but also as a likely source of political and social instability. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the disastrous outcome of the First World War, Atatürk believed that Turkey could only survive as a viable entity if it was reconstructed as a strictly secular state.⁶

However, this argument is unpersuasive even after a cursory analysis of Atatürk's attitudes and actions. On the 'conservative' reading, Atatürk could be viewed as a pragmatist who took the necessary steps to drag his country into the twentieth century. However, there is good evidence to suggest that Atatürk was strongly attracted by liberal rationalism in principle as well as in practice. This explains his willingness to adopt methods which were reminiscent of the French revolutionaries. In his *Reflections on the French Revolution*, Edmund Burke asserted that 'man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against, not only our reason but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long'.⁷ From this perspective, Burke ranked the attempts of French revolutionaries to extirpate Catholicism high among their numerous offences (see Chapter 5).

In 1924, the year after Atatürk became Turkey's president, references to Islam (previously recognized as the state religion) were excised from the constitution. Dress, education, working practices, even the calendar and the alphabet were subjected to sweeping 'Westernizing' reforms.⁸ Far from seeking a way to preserve some respect for his country's political traditions, as a conservative would be expected to do, Atatürk sought to supersede them and to erase memories of the Ottoman Empire. Even Atatürk's adopted name symbolizes his distance from the conservative outlook – to allow oneself to be called 'Father of the Turks' is to accept the unconservative view that a nation's life can begin with the rule of a single individual.

While Atatürk presented himself as the embodiment of an ideology – Kemalism – the AKP document of 2012 portrays the party as a movement whose appeal derives from the cogency and coherence of its ideas rather than association with any political figure. The AKP's reaction against Atatürk is most obvious in its stated objections to authoritarian, 'top-down' change. Echoing Burke, the document insists that conservatism should not be confused with last-ditch defence of the status quo, but that reform should emerge from an organic process based on respect for tradition.

On this basis, if Atatürk was 'Father of the Turks', the AKP's document presents it as 'The Party of the Turks' – a 'catch-all' party in the parlance of political science, again reminiscent of the German Christian Democratic Union. A more sober appraisal of the AKP's project would begin with the argument that Atatürk's secularism has proved unsuitable for Turkey, and that this was entirely predictable from a conservative viewpoint. Islam, and memories of the Ottomans, were far too potent to be repressed out of existence. Despite Atatürk's efforts, Islam retained the allegiance of an overwhelming majority of Turks. The cultural legacy of the Ottoman Empire proved equally enduring, remaining highly visible (for example)

in the architecture of Istanbul (the former Constantinople), in contrast to Ankara which became the Republic's capital under Atatürk.

The AKP document suggests a desire to learn from Atatürk's mistakes rather than to emulate his example by attempting to efface his acknowledged achievement in transforming the country from the nineteenth century's 'sick man of Europe' to a significant power on the global stage. The obvious way to move on from Kemalism was to show that Islam can play a constructive role within a Turkish state and society which nevertheless continues to exhibit significant similarities with Western democracies. This interpretation explains the 2012 AKP document's reference to 'Societal and cultural diversity'. On the one hand, this could be read as a signal to Muslims that the state will no longer discriminate against them – and, indeed, that the majority Sunni population would not repress other denominations. Equally, it offers reassurance to non-Muslims at home – and Western governments – that the secular state will not be replaced by some kind of theocracy, in which the discriminatory boot will henceforth be on the other foot.

In the quoted document, the AKP's approach is hailed as a model for other countries in the region to follow in the wake of the numerous popular uprisings (the 'Arab Spring') which began in 2011. Change in neighbouring countries, the document stressed, was inevitable; but 'it must take place peacefully and with national consensus' (AKP 2012, 64). However, the practical application of the AKP's ideas to contemporary Turkey, let alone the wider region, was always likely to raise difficulties. The removal of 'Kemalist' restrictions on devout followers of Islam could easily inspire attempts to reclaim the privileged position which Islam enjoyed under the Ottomans, influencing state policy and transforming intermediate institutions such as education and the law. The 'top-down' Kemalist programme, in short, might be sent into reverse. In turn, this would expose the extent to which Atatürk had actually *succeeded* in his drive to transform Turkish society and culture. A substantial proportion of the Turkish people has embraced secularism; opinion surveys suggest that more than 10 per cent of Turks have no religious affiliation, and even many of those who retain their Islamic faith are disinclined to welcome even the hint of theocracy.⁹ Thus, an approach which was clearly designed to appeal to all Turks, whether secular or religious, could very easily end up exposing and accentuating thinly concealed divisions.

The AKP in practice

The foregoing interpretation derives support from the course of events since the publication of the quoted document in 2012. In June 2013, Germany blocked talks on Turkey's accession to the EU after Erdogan's government responded violently to a protest held in Istanbul's Taksim Square – a place with strong historical resonances relating to the Ottoman

Empire as well as commemorating the foundation of the Republic.¹⁰ In November 2013, the AKP broke off its relationship with the EPP and allied itself to a Eurosceptic grouping in the European Parliament, signaling that Erdogan's government was now far less interested in EU membership. At least in part, the new tougher line against dissent was inspired by clear evidence which contradicted the 2012 document's distinctively conservative claim that under AKP governance 'Turkey is making peace with its own history and geography' (AKP 2012, 65). This implied a concerted attempt to bring a peaceful end to the long-running campaign to secure independence for Turkey's Kurish population in the south of the country, but in practice Erdogan resumed the more familiar tactic of violent repression.¹¹

Under Attaturk and his successors, the Turkish military had enjoyed a degree of popularity and influence which was difficult to reconcile with a healthy liberal democracy. However, Erdogan had obvious reasons to resent the armed forces, which portrayed themselves as guarantors of the secular republic. Once the AKP had won power, he began to promote AKP supporters in place of Kemalist officers. In July 2016, a group within the military attempted a coup, essentially arguing that the conservative principles stated by the AKP in 2012 had proved to be a sham. Instead, Ataturk's secular regime was being undermined, democracy was endangered and human rights were being abused. The attempt was quickly suppressed; and in its wake hundreds of thousands of people – known dissidents, soldiers, teachers and journalists – were either imprisoned or dismissed.¹²

The abortive coup was so convenient for Erdogan that many were ready to believe that he had either planned or at least encouraged it himself. The fact that this interpretation was widely believed is in itself a reflection on the AKP's self-proclaimed 'conservatism', since the self-interested promotion of instability must be counted as the most culpable of conservative sins. Suspicions grew when Erdogan called a referendum on constitutional proposals which essentially envisaged a switch from parliamentary to presidential government. Despite a very favourable context, in the poll (April 2017), the government prevailed by a narrow margin, and international observers were not satisfied that it had been fairly conducted. No democrat could have regarded a vote of just over 50% as decisive in such momentous decisions; a conservative would have taken it as the signal for the kind of compromise recommended in the 2012 AKP document. Erdogan, however, was in no mood to cut a deal with his critics.

The wheel has not turned a complete circle in Turkey, and Ataturk is still a respected figure. However, it seems that the coup and the referendum have cemented the position of a regime with comparable power, which is determined to disprove the gist of Ataturk's remark that 'He is a weak ruler who needs religion to uphold his government'.¹³ Edmund Burke's notion that religion is an eradicable component of human nature – and his apparent assumption that it lends invariable support to conservative governance – was easily refutable in his own lifetime, from an observation

of politics in his native Ireland. If divisions between Christians in the late eighteenth century acted as a driver for intolerant policies and violent resistance, the same considerations may also be true of Islam in the early twenty-first century.¹⁴ Nevertheless, apparently Erdogan is hoping to prove that a state which is Islamic in nature if not (as yet) in name can be stable and prosperous in a globalized economy. It is too early to tell whether his attempt will be successful; but if it does succeed, it will do so on a basis which is far removed from the 'conservative-democratic' position outlined in *Political Vision of the AK Parti*.

It would be perverse, rather than merely ironic, if the AKP had claimed to be 'conservative' only as a tactical ploy to help it secure a position from which it could usher in an indefinite period of violent instability. Nevertheless, this scenario is inherently plausible. After all, the ill-fated Welfare Party which provided Erdogan with his initial power base had a clear ideological mission which could be characterized as 'conservative', but is better described as 'reactionary' since it was inspired at least in part by a romanticized view of the Ottoman Empire. It argued that Islamic states in general had been corrupted by contact with the West and that Turkey could reclaim its leading role in the Islamic world only if it threw off that influence.

In 2001, another explicitly Islamist organization (the 'Virtue' Party') was held by the Constitutional Court to have infringed the state's secular principles.¹⁵ For ambitious Islamicist leaders like Erdogan, the only recourse was to seek power under a different guise. His timing was propitious; the AKP was founded less than a month before the '9/11' terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. A movement which claimed to be 'conservative-democratic' – an identity on which Erdogan continued to insist, as opposed to 'Muslim-democratic' – was far less likely to incur obstruction from the Turkish courts, and to secure a warm welcome from the United States and (especially) the EU.

We saw earlier that the 2012 document exhibited a tension between 'conservative' and 'liberal' elements. It could be argued that since then the AKP has discarded the de-contextualized 'liberalism', while retaining the 'conservative' principles. To some observers, conservatism is synonymous with 'authoritarian' rule; and on this basis Erdogan has merely moved since 2012 from a 'democratic' or 'liberal' style of conservatism to its more usual manifestation.¹⁶ However, as Atatürk's record shows, 'authoritarianism' is not the monopoly of a single ideology. It is most usefully understood as a mode of governance adopted by any regime which seeks to impose uniform obedience on a society which exhibits unmistakable symptoms of a frustrating diversity, and (as in the example of Stalin's misuse of power in the Soviet Union) thus can become an end in itself if the society in question refuses to conform.

For conservatives, repression can only be justified as a temporary measure to bring a nation to its senses – to restore a social harmony which has been disrupted by developments which are alien to its traditional practices.

Erdogan and his supporters presumably view Ataturk's initiatives as an example of such an alien intrusion, and continue to regard themselves as agents of a blessed restoration which will ultimately promote national unity under Islamic guidance. However, the secularist genie cannot be forced back into its bottle. Turkey is a bitterly divided nation state, beset by multiple fault lines – as, indeed, it was throughout the history of the Ottoman Empire, which in its latter stages oscillated between 'liberal' initiatives to embrace 'societal and cultural diversity' and outright genocide (culminating in the Armenian massacres which disgraced the Empire's last decade).

Turkey has never been an exception to the general rule that the strength of identity politics in any state or region bears an inverse relationship to the possibility of 'conservative' governance, in any meaningful sense. In their attempt to recreate an Islamic state in Turkey, Erdogan and the AKP are clearly aware that their hand has been enhanced by the anti-Islamic Ataturk; thanks to his efforts, Turkey is now too strong as well as too extensive and complicated for other global players to contemplate its collapse with equanimity. On current trends, it looks as if a party which promised to prove that political Islam could embrace a 'conservative' brand of pluralism looks set to follow the familiar model of repressive rule in the Middle East, struggling to maintain a veneer of stability in a way which gives additional impetus to Turkey's centrifugal forces.