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A Party with Islamist Roots Wins the Parliamentary Election in Turkey

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Although there are more than 40 countries in the world with majority Muslim populations, many, but not all, of those countries have Islamic governments. Many states, such as Egypt and Pakistan, have legal codes and governmental structures that combine Islamic and international forms. Others, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, regard their forms of government and law to be based entirely on Islamic principles. Turkey has long been the exception; since its formation as a republic in the 1920s, Turkey has been a secular state. With the AK party—a party with Islamist leaders—winning the November election, many wonder whether this will change. Should the West worry that Turkey, a NATO member, will turn toward radical Islam?

In the 1920s, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder and first prime minister of the Republic of Turkey, instituted sweeping changes designed to sunder the identity of modern Turkey from its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire. Those changes included closing religious schools, replacing the Arabic alphabet with Latin script, basing all legal codes on European models, and ending any public role for Islam, whether in government, in courts, or in education. Atatürk was committed to modernization and westernization, and he believed that to achieve progress, Turkey had to become a secular state, where religious practice would become a private matter. Secularism was introduced over much opposition from religious leaders.

Since the 1920s, Turkey remained committed to secularism, but policies about Islam became less restrictive. Muslim schools opened, and Islamic organizations and publications appeared. Still, Turkey does not allow religious groups to organize political parties; instead parties that have goals like instating some aspects of Islamic [Shari'a] law have called themselves by non-religious names. In November, a party called Justice and Development, or AK, won the Turkish election in a landslide. The party leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has been a member of various Islamist parties since the 1970s.

But Erdoğan's new party, AK, decided to accommodate to the Turkish law on secularism. AK declared that it is a secular party, and presented a platform that calls for economic and constitutional reform, but does not even mention Islam.

Many Turks voted for AK because they believe this party offers hope for cleaning up Turkey's economic corruption and pulling Turkey out of recession. Others favored AK's position on religious freedom and ethnic equality—allowing Kurds to use their own language and form their own parties. And those who want Shari'a law voted for AK because Erdoğan has long been known as a leader of an Islamist movement. No matter what commitment he has made to secularism, they believe he will pursue an Islamist agenda. However, Erdoğan is known as a moderate. Islamists in Turkey usually have as their main goal attaining full freedom of religious expression, not radically transforming the state.

Turkey faces economic problems, and has been rejected for membership in the European Union. The Justice and Development Party promises to increase economic competition, to help closed factories to reopen, and to improve social services. They also promise to end the state's use of torture, and to bring legal rights and practices up to the standards of the European Union. AK's leaders convinced Turks that they would pursue many reforms that other parties have been unable or unwilling to bring about. Nothing in their program suggests that AK will make radical changes to Turkey's tradition of secularism, or to its international alliances. Turks simply want AK to deliver justice and development.

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