

Erdoğan's secular opening

Tuesday 27 September 2011, by [Etyen Mahçupyan](#)

The way Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's was treated in Egypt and Libya, where he paid a visit as part of his Middle East tour, receiving a warm welcome from the peoples there, and the way he viewed this as being most natural, inevitably raises a discussion of Turkey's imperial vision.

Obviously, Turkey plays a role in this region that is reminiscent of the Ottoman era. This becomes more evident if you add the row with Israel to this picture. For the first time, we are witnessing that a Turkish government is "right" and that it is exerting efforts towards making its stance known in the political realm. And besides, it is Israel that it is dealing with. Even this stance of Erdoğan alone would suffice to win the hearts of the Muslim peoples. Therefore, even before the tour, he had a trump card of populism that he would be able to use. Most probably, those who argue that the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) is imposing a guardianship that brings into question neo-Ottomanism on society had no doubt that the prime minister would act this way. However, unlike expectations held in secular and left-wing circles, Erdoğan made a surprising move. He stressed that he is not pursuing a national policy, but that he is serving as the messenger of an ethical language and that democracy should be the criterion for the legitimacy of the new Muslim geography taking shape. However, the discourse by the Muslim head of government of Turkey was not limited to this. Erdoğan publicly promoted secularism and identified this concept as an indispensable part of democracy. This was a revolutionary move given that he represents a group of people who have been persecuted and belittled by the "Cumhuriyet" regime for their anti-secularist actions and views. Besides, Erdoğan made this remark not to please Western countries, but because he really believed this was the best thing to do.

The primary reasons for the significant progress that the Islamists have made in Turkey can be attributed to the fact that notions like secularism have been shaped according to the mindset they sprang from. In other words, secularism is not responsible for what happened in Turkey; it was the authoritarian mindset of Kemalism that was responsible. However, from a strictly democratic mindset or perspective, secularism can serve as assurance for the religious freedoms and daily lives of Muslim people.

Erdoğan, who understands this all too well, made a few interrelated statements in Egypt and Libya. The first one was freeing the notion of secularism from the hegemony of the West. The prime minister, by opposing a strictly Western definition of secularism, universalized the concept. Truth be told, secularism is historically a product of the West; however, we observe that even in today's Europe, it can become a prisoner of an authoritarian mindset.

Erdoğan, turning secularism into an outlook as opposed to an all encompassing identity, made secularism "an assurance for all faiths," because this understanding allowed for the state to remain at an equal distance to all faiths, while not forcing the individual to have to choose a certain faith. A natural outcome of this was that Islam and democracy can exist together. And Erdoğan stressed that a Muslim could successfully run a secular state.

In Libya, Erdoğan went even further and argued that secularism does not entail atheism or opposition to religion. He took another psychological step and included atheists in his list of faith groups. Maybe some still believe that these are not his sincere views. However, it should be noted that Erdoğan's opinion is widely held among Muslims in Turkey. The prime minister noted that the people are well aware of his views and that it was for this reason that his party received the support of the 50 percent of the voters.

Erdoğan's secular move serves as a confirmation of an ongoing change. As it gets rid of its ideological chains, Turkey takes enormous steps that accelerate the history. At the time Erdoğan was touring the

Middle East, his wife, Emine Erdoğan, was opening an exhibition of works by 74 female artists. Emine Erdoğan, who said that self-recognition, identifying the limits and pushing these limits are only possible through art, stressed that good art is the best way forward for individual progress, and she finished her speech with a feminist tone by saying “mankind needs art touched by women.”

Good things are happening in Turkey and it seems that they will continue to happen in the future.

Sources

Source : Todayszaman, 22 September 2011, Thursday