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Democracy, identity, and foreign policy in Turkey: hegemony through transformation

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BOOK REVIEW

Democracy, identity, and foreign policy in Turkey: hegemony through transformation, by E. Fuat Keyman and Şebnem Gümüşçü, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 216 pp., £58.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-230-35427-2

The past decades have witnessed Turkey's transformation in the economic, political, social and cultural spheres. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has effectively governed this pivotal process which culminated in Turkey's regional power role in world politics and emergence, to some extent, as an inspiring reform model for many countries in its region. Hence, the "AKP experience" – domestically enabled by the Islamic-rooted party's "electoral hegemony" since 2002 – has been at the forefront of both scholarly and policy-oriented analyses of Turkey in the last decade.

Departing from these developments, this book offers a much-needed critical reading of Turkey under AKP rule. Rather than conducting yet another empirical study of Turkey and the AKP, the authors critically analyse the specific dynamics of Turkey's recent transformation and the AKP's resulting hegemony as well as implications for further transformation, particularly, democratic consolidation. In doing so, the book is not oblivious to history. Rather, it carefully traces the dimensions of Turkey's recent transformation process under the AKP by taking into account "both continuities and changes that have been occurring in Turkey since 1923" (p. 1). More importantly, the empirical analysis of the individual chapters is guided by a theoretical framework hypothesizing the extent of the causal relationship between transformation, hegemony and democratic consolidation. Hence, the book not only empirically

uncovers how these complex phenomena have historically played out in Turkish politics but also discusses what this means for our broader theoretical understanding of these fundamental concepts and their mutual interactions in the Turkish case and beyond.

The book starts with the central premise that Turkey's transformation has historically occurred along four principal dimensions: modernization; democratization; globalization; and Europeanization. While the modernization and democratization processes go back to the foundation of the modern Turkish Republic and Turkey's transition to multi-party democracy in 1950, respectively, globalization and Europeanization have arisen more recently as part of Turkey's transition to a neoliberal free-market economy since the 1980s and relations with the European Union following its EU candidacy in 1999.

The authors argue that the AKP's electoral hegemony and ensuing political dominance are rooted in its effective engagement with Turkey's recent transformation. Unlike the opposition parties which have traditionally failed to address this multi-dimensional process of change, the AKP emerged as a centre-right party offering a reform-oriented programme compatible with Turkey's ongoing transformation and thus secured three consecutive electoral victories. In turn, the party's hegemony has enabled it to pursue further transformation in Turkey over the course of the past 12 years. Hence, electoral hegemony and transformation have

reinforced each other and created a “virtuous cycle of dominance” for the AKP.

However, as the authors carefully discuss in the empirical chapters, AKP-led transformation has not always been conducted with the same rigour and consistency that marked the AKP’s first term in office. In general, the party has delivered more successfully in some areas than in others. Specifically, while the AKP performed rather well in civilianizing Turkish politics, democratizing Turkey’s tradition of “assertive secularism”, modernizing the state bureaucracy, maintaining economic growth and stability, addressing the Kurdish problem and formulating foreign policy activism, its reform record with respect to democratization and Europeanization has been characterized by “wild swings”.

The authors attribute this variation to the “power fusion” increasingly practised by the successive AKP governments. While electoral hegemony itself is not inherently conducive to excess of executive power, in the AKP’s case, it has increasingly fed into the party’s majoritarian and instrumental understanding of democracy, thus giving rise to its systematic “swings between democratic reform and authoritarian retreat” (p. 4).

The consequences of the AKP’s monopolization of power have been far-reaching, as the individual chapters discussing various policy areas skilfully demonstrate. In this respect, one of the book’s key findings is that the AKP’s discourse of polarization and “otherization” has generated a growing sense of alienation among the secular middle classes and created a “crisis-prone Turkey” marked by social and political tension that remain explosive. The chapters carefully trace how this flawed approach to

democracy has shaped the AKP’s deteriorating reform record (or, “democratic erosion”, as the authors put it) in freedoms of expression, association and information as well as the party’s relations with civil society and handling of key issues such as secularism and the Kurdish problem.

In the final analysis, its theoretically framed, empirically rich and thoroughly critical study of the AKP rule sets this book apart from many of the existing works in the literature on Turkey and the AKP. In addition, the book is a significant contribution to the broader literatures on secularism, Islamism and democracy as well as the democratization literature via formulating two key conclusions: (1) “a post-Islamist party in power operating in a secular framework is not a guarantee for democratization” (p. 7); (2) transformation and hegemony do not necessarily result in democratic consolidation. Empirically speaking, the only weakness of the book lies in its insufficient analysis of the “EU anchor” as a historically fundamental source of Turkish democratization, as acknowledged by the authors. The concluding chapter would have certainly benefited from a more detailed elaboration of the EU element in Turkey’s democratic consolidation. In short, the book is a must-read for academic audiences and practitioners alike interested in evaluating Turkey’s AKP experience with a scientifically rigorous and critical perspective.

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