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The ‘Turkish model’ isn’t good for Turkey

Karabekir Akkoyunlu

Could Turkey (/search/Turkey) serve as a model (/search/model) for the new Arab regimes? Ever since the beginning of the Arab Spring analysts in the West, Turkey (/search/Turkey) and the Arab world have been mulling over this question.

On both shores of the Atlantic, enthusiasts of the so-called Turkish (/search/Turkish) model (/search/model) argue that it is not only good for the Arab world but also for the West, with Turkey (/search/Turkey) once again serving as the bridge in between. A crucial question has been missing from this debate: is the Turkish (/search/Turkish) model (/search/model) good for Turkey (/search/Turkey)?

For decades, Kemalist Turkey (/search/Turkey) looked to the West in search of “the contemporary civilization.” By the late 1990s, the idea of the West no longer stood for stagnant nationalist utopia but rather a liberal democratic model (/search/model), symbolized by European Union membership. Some of Turkey (/search/Turkey)’s boldest democratic reforms were put in place in the early 2000s in pursuit of this model (/search/model).

But being a model (/search/model)-taker also meant that Turkey (/search/Turkey) was constantly criticized for its numerous shortcomings, often by arrogant Europeans who looked at Turkey (/search/Turkey) with disdain and treated it with double standards – or so the Turks came to believe.

Turning into a model (/search/model)-maker has given a remarkable confidence boost to a people who have been told for decades that they were not good enough. At long last, the world was talking about Turkey (/search/Turkey)’s triumphs, not failures. And so, egged on by a TV-induced public nostalgia for Ottoman grandeur, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government and many in the Turkish (/search/Turkish) intelligentsia gladly welcomed a western narrative that depicts Turkey (/search/Turkey) as a neo-imperial power in the Middle (/search/Middle) East (/search/East).

Too much confidence, however, can be as hazardous as excessive humility. The new narrative advertises Turkey (/search/Turkey) as a booming free market economy and a pro-western democracy led by moderate Islamists. Yet the shiny surface conceals a bleaker reality: a vulnerable economy coping with a record current account deficit, a society bitterly divided along ethnic and religious fault lines, a chauvinistic state tradition that continues to cover up its historical and more recent crimes, and an overbearing government intent on adopting the authoritarian legacy of its Kemalist predecessors.

The model (/search/model) argument does not only paint a rosy picture of Turkey (/search/Turkey); it also adds to the growing hubris of its decision makers, who seem less tolerant of dissent every day. Is it a coincidence that we compare the current state of civil liberties in Turkey (/search/Turkey) with the gloomy days of the early 90s, at a time when Turkey (/search/Turkey) is being promoted as a role model (/search/model) for the Arab world?

It may also be no accident that this paradox has emerged as the Arab Spring morphs into a ruthless geopolitical struggle for regional hegemony and Turkey (/search/Turkey) eases into the role of a strategic outpost in a western-backed Sunni security alliance. In a picture reminiscent of the Cold War, as the focal point of Turkey (/search/Turkey)’s western relations moves away from Europe back towards the Atlantic, security matters once again trump issues of democracy and human rights in the shared agenda.

Just like its previous version promoted by the neo-conservatives a decade ago, the branding of Turkey (/search/Turkey) as a model (/search/model) for the region has more to do with securing strategic alliances than a genuine concern for democracy in the region. Like the older version, this model (/search/model) is also based on false assumptions and misplaced priorities. It praises an increasingly illiberal Turkey (/search/Turkey), whose rhetoric sounds distastefully imperialistic to many Arab ears.

What Turkey (/search/Turkey) urgently needs is a brave new political language that is both humble and self-confident in order to engage in an honest soul searching at home. This would ease brewing social tensions and ultimately strengthen Turkey (/search/Turkey)’s democracy. Now that would be a worthwhile model (/search/model) to follow.

*Karabekir Akkoyunlu is a doctoral candidate at the London School of Economics and a research associate at South East (/search/East) European Studies at Oxford Turkey (/search/Turkey), Middle East (/search/Middle East), Turkish model (/search/Turkish model), greater middle east project (/search/greater middle east project)(SEESOX).

