

# The Roots of Authoritarianism in Turkish Neoliberalism

## Contrivers' Review

Turkey has long been a source of interest for those who study the development of the modern state and capitalism in the non-Western world. The processes of capitalist incorporation and the modern state formation brought the end of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of nation states such as the Republic of Turkey in the Middle East. This great metamorphosis of the early twentieth century sparked the attention of many prominent intellectuals from different ends of the political spectrum, including Marxists like Trotsky and Luxemburg

almost a century ago during the revolutionary period of change between 1900s–1930s. Since 2002, a similar process of transformation is taking place in Turkey with the rise of the AKP (the Justice and Development Party). Once more Turkey's change is attracting much attention and is perplexing us as it unfolds with ensuing chapters of power struggles.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the leader of the AKP, was initially welcomed as a progressive Islamist who could 'prove' to the world that Islam, capitalism, liberalism, and democratic values can coexist and thrive. Those who were critical of or disillusioned by the previous westernizing, modernizing, corporatist, and secular power block, the Kemalists, welcomed the AKP as a progressive social force as it mobilized the masses who were disenfranchised by the previous regime or contested its pattern of modernization. His movement was the first Islamic movement in the region to openly embrace capitalism and advocate liberal values. When the AKP entered the political arena, the only viable electoral alternative was a relatively more statist and protectionist Kemalism, which was less desirable for global capital compared to Erdoğan's movement. Erdoğan

found national and international fame swiftly as he claimed his first electoral victory in 2002. The AKP was promoted as a role model for struggling regimes of the Middle East. His power grew exponentially and uninterruptedly after that initial victory. He has outlasted his rivals through several political challenges including a court case to close down his party in 2008, the Arab Spring-like Gezi revolt, an alleged corruption scandal in 2013, and a failed coup attempt which took place during the time of the writing of this review in 2016.

Today, Erdoğan and his movement evoke as much fascination as fear. It has concentrated unprecedented power, eroded rule of law, engaged in international crises, promoted unsustainable and environmentally destructive growth driven by construction, Islamized public space, and undermined an already problematic secularism in Turkey. But how did a political party that evoked so much hope for progress and democratization in 2002 run aground in the most terrible ways? Its Syrian policy bankrupted, it became practically and legally authoritarian and now it's in the process of creating a one-party state and amending the constitution for a 'Turkish-style' presidency. How did so many people fail to see this refutation of democracy? What did the left say during his ascension to power? What did the liberals and the conservatives say? How could the EU or the Obama administration remain pro-AKP for so long? Did the AKP and/or Erdoğan change at one point or did he always have such an agenda? Whether or not Erdoğan's movement always had an authoritarian, Muslim nationalist feature that only surfaced with subsequent challenges is still at the heart of debates surrounding the AKP. Cihan Tuğal's new book, *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought Down Islamic Liberalism*, is a welcome and refreshing look into those questions. His study is very user-friendly for a readership that is not directly familiar with Turkey or the Middle East. It focuses on the political economic aspects of this story through a Gramscian lens.

Cihan Tuğal works on Islamic mobilization in Turkey, Egypt, and Iran. His research focuses on socioeconomic change, mobilization, and the role of religion in sociopolitical projects. His 2009 book *Passive Revolution*:

*Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism* was a pioneering study on the rise of the AKP and the transformation of Islamist ideology in general. In this book, Tuğal argues that the Islamists of Turkey absorbed and internalized the discourses of their ideological enemies in a process of passive revolution. This passive revolution helped them become the new historic bloc

without a violent revolution. The political structures and the ‘rules of the game’ are transformed without strong social processes. This argument is used to explain how the AKP, unlike many other Islamists in the Middle East, accepted a form of capitalism and democracy that eventually brought it major success.

The AKP’s economic liberalization coupled with its rhetorical dedication to political liberalism turned Erdoğan’s party and style into a ‘role model’ for successful liberalization of the Middle East and ‘rendering Islam governable.’

Tuğal defines this ‘Turkish model’ as an:

Islamic Americanism with a revolutionary rhetoric, backed by liberals and some leftists in its half-hearted fight against the remnants of authoritarian secularism. Islamic neoliberalism in Turkey brought about an uneven (but still real) cultural, political, and economic inclusion of disadvantaged strata into established institutions without the need for revolutionary mobilization. Turkish Islamists had found a formula that could absorb the shock of the Iranian revolution.

The formula proved popular at home and abroad, and this popularity glossed over the internal contradictions of its logic and its authoritarianism, according to Tuğal, until the Gezi revolt in June 2013. From then onward the contradictions of Islamic liberalism—its authoritarian tendencies, its intra-elite struggles and its reckless neoliberal drive of growth—became obvious discontents. It felt like the AKP lost some sort of a rhetorical immunity from criticism that it enjoyed whilst the facades of ‘democratization’ and ‘growth’ were sustained. Tuğal does not

delve into this in depth, but this demise was also a consequence of the AKP's crumbling foreign policy that increasingly isolated Erdoğan.

Many scholarly studies broadly agree on these basic facts concerning the fate of the AKP. The big debate emerges from the questions 'why and when' the demise began. Tuğal's genuine contributions start precisely with the 'end' of the hopes for Islamic liberalism, as he puts it, and his answer to the question 'why.' He looks at political economy instead of civil society or cultural explanations, and he consequently sees authoritarianism from the very beginning of the AKP, unlike others who often see authoritarianism emerging during different times of the AKP's tenure. He argues that AKP's Islamist passive revolution, which absorbed the bottom-up energies of Islamism in Turkey 'generated by 1968, the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the challenge of radical Islam,'

was doomed to fail and he asks if this tells us anything new about the nature of passive revolutions as such.

The AKP's model is doomed to fail, according to Tuğal, not because of its leader's much criticized persona or the sociological background of the movement's constituency, but because of 'the neoliberal-liberal democratic model' that it pursued.

This is an interesting argument since that very model was what promoted 'AKP cheerleading', as Tuğal occasionally puts it, by the actors that pursued a new hegemonic order in the Middle East. In the first half of his book, Tuğal spends much of his energy, very productively, convincing the reader about why the AKP's authoritarianism and its model's flaws were overlooked by the global actors until 2013. He argues that the flaws were there since the beginning but they were ignored. The AKP's demise is linked to the crisis of world capitalism's hegemonic order lead by the US.

During the Arab uprisings, or the Arab Spring, which preceded the Gezi revolt, the AKP's internal contradictions still had not surfaced, and it appeared to many commentators and decision makers that the AKP's 'Turkish model' could be exported to countries like Tunisia, Egypt, or Iran.

That was indeed a very fascinating yet short interval of time. Tuğal engages with a comparative analysis of these countries' moments of transformation after the Arab Spring and argues that despite their potential for economic liberalization, the Turkish model or an Islamic passive revolution, could not have been adopted in these countries primarily because the Turkish model was uniquely conditional to Turkey. His comparisons (chapters 3 to 5) serve to make this point stronger by distinguishing particular differences between these three countries' liberalization processes as opposed to Turkey where a combination of factors made the rise of the AKP possible. Tuğal's insightful summaries of Egyptian, Iranian, and Tunisian attempts of transformation provide new perspectives for scholars interested in these countries.

One could naturally ask how the AKP could sustain the level of popularity it has had and gain electoral victories with the kind of authoritarianism and neoliberal economic agenda that Tuğal accurately argues are damaging to the very classes of people who support the movement. This question has been puzzling those who study contemporary Turkey, and it's the same question that puzzled Gramsci while he was writing the *Prison Notebooks*. Tuğal's book does not deal with this question head-on (unlike his previous book *Passive Revolution*), but it occasionally bumps into it as he describes the AKP as a 'good consent builder' and a benefactor of certain segments of society. However, the political economy framework falls short of analyzing how the AKP could have been such a good consent builder at home for so many years given its poor human development index performance.

The AKP's antagonistic but successful mobilization of its own constituency needs as much attention as its ability to convince global actors.

Whatever reputation the Turkish model had in May 2013 was gone by the end of the summer of the same year. The Gezi Park protests of May, which started initially as an environmentalist reaction to the AKP's destructive construction driven growth, turned into the Gezi revolt by the end of August 2013. The protests soon attracted large segments of people who were unhappy with various aspects of the AKP's rule since 2002.

Thousands took to the streets in the urban centers across Turkey, and a brief commune was established in Taksim square, the ground zero of the protests. Leftists, nationalists, Kurdish activists, LGBT groups, feminists, and many others, sometimes with conflicting political agendas, united under their opposition to neoliberalism, the AKP, political Islam, and a broad call for pluralism. Erdoğan's disastrous and violent handling of the situation exposed the inner contradictions and limits of the AKP's model both at home and abroad.

The Turkish Islamists' most powerful political tool, consent building through a pro-democratic and pro-capitalist discourse, bankrupted as Gezi Park protesters were crushed by disproportionate state violence for months. Tuğal's book presents a very good analysis of why and how a particular group, the urban middle classes, came to be the first group to show collective discontent against the AKP's policies during the Gezi revolt of 2013. It is a valuable addition to the field of study given the scholarly confusion the Gezi revolt created as to its nature and constituency. In this book, Tuğal builds on his previous writing

on the topic, expands it and accurately defines the Gezi movement as a predominantly middle class one that is essentially anti-commodification. The Gezi revolt becomes a litmus paper or truth test for the AKP's rhetorical dedication to democracy and pluralism. Thus, it also shows the world the limits of a neoliberal economic model, just like other contemporary protests in places like the United States, Greece, Egypt, Spain, Israel, or Brazil. Tuğal speculates that if Gezi, the end of the Turkish model as he describes it, could be the beginning of a new leftist trajectory in politics.

The feeling that one gets at the end of this book is that the AKP's earlier 'days of promise' were contingent upon the hegemonic hopes of the global north to create a new lebensraum for capital in the region. The AKP's performance appeared like a success while simultaneously causing asymmetric development and discontent, winners and losers, only to release these internal tensions once it was 'stretched' too much during the

attempt to export the Turkish model. It makes one wonder how this particular Islamic passive revolution figures as compared to other examples in history such as the Meiji restoration, the Italian Risorgimento, or the Mexican Revolution. Tuğal provokes us to think in new ways and offers some insightful paths to follow for researchers of contemporary Turkey and neoliberalism. His book is a fresh read in the abundance of books on the AKP and the Arab Uprisings. This is primarily due to his focus on political economy and (neo)Gramscian approach instead of the often-preferred theories on culture and identity.

1. For example: Leon Trotsky, 'The Young Turks,' accessed August 10, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1909/01/1909-turks.htm> (Original Kievskaya Mysl, No.3, 3 January 1909 and Rosa Luxemburg, 'Social Democracy and the National Struggles in Turkey,' August 10, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1896/10/10.htm> (Original: Sächsische Arbeiter-Zeitung, 8–10 October 1986.) ↩
2. A form of a dominant network with particular configurations of material capabilities, discourses and institutions. A historic bloc lies at the heart of Gramscian theory and forms the basis of consent for a particular social order that is dominated by a particular class. It produces and re-produces the hegemony of this dominant class. ↩
3. Cihan Tuğal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought Down Islamic Liberalism* (Verso, 2016), 8. ↩
4. Tuğal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model*, 3–4. ↩
5. Tuğal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model*, 27. ↩
6. Tuğal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model*, 19. ↩
7. Tuğal's third chapter, "The Paths of Economic Liberalization," is a great, thought-provoking chapter where he discusses Turkey's scores in economic development and the Human Development Index in

relation to Tunisia, Egypt and Iran. It provides a valuable insight into the performance of the AKP's economic policies and the damages of these policies. ↩

8. For a very good study on this topic, which is also briefly referred to in Tuğal's book, see: Ayşe Buğra and Osman Savaşkan, *New Capitalism in Turkey: The Relationship between Politics, Religion and Business*, (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2014). ↩
9. Cihan Tuğal, "Resistance everywhere": the Gezi revolt in global perspective' *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no. 49 (2013): 157–172. ↩

