

REVIEWS

Cihan Tuğal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought Down Islamic Liberalism*

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ECE TEMELKURAN

GOOD ENOUGH FOR THE MIDDLE EAST?

If Cihan Tuğal's book was filmed as a political thriller, the pre-credit sequence would go something like this: George Bush, against the backdrop of the Bosphorus Bridge, delivers a speech announcing the discovery of a cure for radical Islamism to the 2004 NATO summit in Istanbul. As Commander-in-Chief of the 'war on terror', Bush has a flattering message for his Turkish hosts: 'Your country stands as a model to others, and as Europe's bridge to the wider world. Your success is vital to a future of progress and peace in Europe and in the broader Middle East.' The 'Turkish model', showing the perfect match of moderate Islam with American-style democracy, would prevent a dangerous fundamentalism from taking hold. The camera would pan back to show the audience of Western leaders eagerly applauding Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan, whose government epitomized the NATO-friendly Islamic liberalism which they hoped would take root in the Middle East. At this point, the screen would darken and the words, 'Twelve Years Later . . .' would appear. In the next scene, the same world leaders would be seen sneaking into a monstrosly flamboyant palace to beg an autocratic President Erdoğan to block the wave of Syrian refugees fleeing the war that the 'democratic face of Islam' had been stoking, with Western collusion, for the past five years. The screen darkens again and the movie's title is emblazoned across it: 'Falling Bridge, Rising Wall'.

The Fall of the Turkish Model offers a forensic analysis of the AKP-Erdoğan phenomenon. For over ten years, Western mainstream intellectuals, media

and politicians were so dazzled by this image of the perfect blend of East and West that objective thinking and critical stances were set aside. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader were praised for creating a *bon pour l'orient democracy*—that is, good enough for the Middle East; clearly not up to Western standards, but acceptable. Abroad, critics of Erdoğan were labelled as self-hating Muslims, unable to cope with their identity. At home, they were at first stigmatized as alienated intellectuals, or cheerleaders for the Turkish Army's role in politics; later they were simply branded 'infidels' or agents of foreign influence. The claim that a majority vote was the same thing as democracy created an atmosphere in which critics of the AKP would automatically be defined as enemies of the people, to be subjected to constant online defamation by the AKP's trolls.

As the Turkish model has grown visibly more tarnished, a few more critics are to be found today, even in the mainstream American media. However, as Cihan Tuğal emphasizes, the complaints are still limited to Erdoğan's authoritarian inclinations and do not question 'Islamic liberalism' itself. He traces the origins of Turkey's Islamist project, its record in power, and its influence on movements elsewhere in the Middle East—especially Egypt and Tunisia, where attempts to emulate the AKP ran into the ground after 2011. From an apparent high point in the first phase of the Arab uprisings, when Erdoğan's disciples looked set to inherit the region, the Turkish brand of Islamism has now been driven back onto its home territory, where it has become ever more reliant on coercion to maintain its grip. Tuğal is critical of fashionable scholarly approaches which 'eulogize civil society' as a habitat for liberal Islamist mobilization against the 'secular' Middle Eastern state. He proposes instead a broadly Gramscian framework with a focus on 'political society', defined as 'a field of actors and organizations that have comprehensive social visions'. In advanced economies with settled liberal democracies, he argues, parties usually predominate in this field; but in more dynamic situations, it will be 'populated by sociopolitical organizations and groups that are difficult to classify'. The interaction of these actors with state and civic structures will determine whether a country faced with a strategic impasse will follow one of three paths: revolution, counter-revolution or passive revolution, in the Gramscian sense of 'restoration–revolution'. For Tuğal, a nation's socio-economic, political and cultural path is sustainable 'only when it rests on a well-organized power bloc' capable of welding together the 'interests, dispositions and outlooks of various dominant strata', and of mobilizing wider social layers behind its project.

This analytical framework is then used to examine the outcomes in four countries where modernizing, nationalist projects took shape under the direction of secular elites: Turkey, Iran, Egypt and Tunisia. By the closing decades of the twentieth century, all four had reached an impasse.

The Egyptian and Tunisian regimes had largely discarded their nationalist trappings and become Western client states, in thrall to the Washington Consensus—especially Tunisia, which was, in Tuğal’s words, ‘the most orthodox neoliberal regime in the Arab world’ and something of a poster-child for the IMF. On the other hand, the fall of Pahlavi’s dictatorship in Iran and its replacement by an Islamic Republic supplied a model, both positive and negative, for religious forces throughout the region. Turkish Islamists went through several organizational mutations before consolidating as the Welfare Party in the 1980s; they managed to increase their vote steadily, from 8 per cent in 1987 to 16 per cent in 1991 and 21 per cent in 1995, when they emerged as the largest party. The movement also trained a generation of cadres through the İmam Hatip religious schools: ‘In a country where intellectuals had previously been equated with the left, the emergence of this new, avowedly Muslim intelligentsia would be a significant element in the construction of Islamism as a hegemonic alternative.’

The first Welfare Party government under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan clashed with Turkey’s Kemalist establishment and was deposed in a military coup in 1997. This experience helped crystallize the ideas of a younger generation of Islamist politicians grouped around the Istanbul mayor Tayyip Erdoğan, who first tried to take over Erbakan’s reconstituted party, then broke away to form the AKP in 2001. As Tuğal explains, the new party set out to convince established power-holders at home and abroad that they had nothing to fear:

The AKP would not challenge the headscarf ban, they reassured the old elite. They emphasized their allegiance to the free market (in line with the interests of their own increasingly bourgeois support base) and parliamentary democracy. The leaders were also vociferously pro-European and committed to the process of EU accession. They made frequent trips to the United States.

For Tuğal, the AKP leadership was trying to forge ‘an updated version of that alliance of export-oriented businessmen, religious intellectuals and the state elite at which the subordinate fraction of the power bloc had traditionally aimed’. Above all, it was the newly rich provincial businessmen of the central Anatolian region that would provide the AKP’s social foundation in the 1990s. Their offices were all decorated in the same fashion: a replica of the Bosphorus Bridge, bookshelves adorned with a set of *Ana Britannica* encyclopedias, and a cheap nylon *seccade*, or prayer rug. When asked why they had the *seccade* on display, the answer was always the same: ‘Nobody would want to do business with us otherwise.’ The modest prayer rug was a sign of humility and religious faith, while the *Ana Britannica*—a free promotional gift offered by newspapers and magazines in those days—symbolized respect for enlightenment. This *nouveau-riche* layer paved the way for Erdoğan and

his party's ascent by enlisting millions of their employees in the movement. The AKP's narrative of modern Turkish history presented these people as the real backbone of Turkey, a class formerly oppressed by the secular Kemalist elite. At the same time, the AKP was highly successful in mobilizing support from liberals with its pro-EU orientation and talk of cutting the Army's political role down to size.

Erdogan's formula delivered electoral success in 2002, with 34 per cent of the vote and a comfortable majority of seats. Subsequent elections saw the AKP's vote rise dramatically: over 46 per cent in 2007 and just shy of 50 per cent in 2011. This was also a period of high economic growth: GDP per capita rose from \$4,000 in 2000 to \$10,000 in 2010, leaving Egypt, Iran and Tunisia far behind. The Turkish variety of 'Islamic liberalism' was hailed by Western and Arab observers alike as a template for the region to follow. As Tuğal argues, however, the AKP's commitment to democratic practice was never deeply rooted: Erdogan had governed Istanbul in the 1990s with an iron fist, and the party's internal structures were quite literally based on 'one man, one vote'—Erdogan was the man, and he had the vote. In 2005, at a time when the AKP was still being praised by Turkish liberals who would later deplore its authoritarian tendencies, the party's interior minister denounced a conference on the Armenian genocide, accusing its organizers of 'stabbing the nation in the back'. The headline figures for economic growth concealed a starkly unequal society, where the wealth share of the richest 1 per cent rose from 38 per cent in 2000 to 54 per cent in 2014. Unemployment remained above 10 per cent—in line with Egypt's performance, though slightly better than Tunisia's—and the rate of workplace deaths was shockingly high: 1,710 in 2011 alone. Growth rates were heavily dependent on flows of hot money from abroad, leaving Turkey vulnerable to any global downturn.

On the international stage, the dream of reviving Ottoman imperialism provided the AKP's energized provincialism with a greater goal. Recognition by world powers as a 'model' legitimized the AKP's delusional hunger for regional influence—especially over the territories which had once been under Ottoman rule. A carefully calibrated campaign, combining occasional rebukes to Israel—as at Davos in 2009, when he intervened to remind Peres of 'the children killed on the beach' in Gaza—while continuing Turkish military exercises with the IDF, saw Erdogan become the most acclaimed leader on the Arab street: in 2009, billboards in a Hezbollah neighbourhood in southern Beirut were adorned with his image under the reproachful slogan, 'Where are the Arab men?' On visits to Arab countries, he was showered with praise by intellectuals and politicians, and often mobbed by ordinary citizens. It was little wonder if the one-time municipal boss from Istanbul, finding himself the focus of such admiration, began to lose the plot; his ego

was so puffed up that he came to believe he was the chosen one, while anyone who dared to criticize him was guilty of rank impiety.

Turkey has always been a sharply divided society, both politically and sociologically—to the extent that there are two kinds of toilet, *à la Turca* and *à la Franca*, that define whether you are a conservative or a secular modernist. The AKP gradually pushed this fragile society towards a dangerous level of polarization. This was already apparent when Bush and the other NATO leaders were promoting the image of Turkey's economic success and democratic transformation. Erdoğan's victory speech after the 2007 election was superficially magnanimous—'to all those who didn't vote for us, don't worry, we will respect your votes'—but its underlying message for the AKP's opponents was clear: they would be tolerated, but would not be considered equal citizens. The Prime Minister's circle of liberal and ex-Marxist intellectual sympathizers were desperate to find a benign democratic message in his words; but in the aftermath, the line between 'us' and 'them', as Tuğal stresses, was drawn ever more clearly. In 2008, Erdoğan warned bluntly: 'We want one nation, one flag and one state. Those who don't approve of this are welcome to leave.' Ultra-nationalists were brought into the ruling coalition; mediocre mafia bosses celebrated Erdoğan as the 'Sultan'.

Erdoğan's cult reached its apogée in 2011, as the *anciens régimes* of the Arab world began to tumble. To the Obama Administration, Egypt and Tunisia appeared to be the most promising candidates for imitation of the AKP's example: in both countries, long-established Islamist movements stepped into the field after Mubarak and Ben Ali were ousted and carried the day in the first competitive elections. The Muslim Brotherhood had the longest history of any fundamentalist movement in the region, while Tunisia's al-Nahda could draw on the profile and leadership skills of Rachid el-Ghannouchi, who combined the roles of Islamic scholar and politician. Tuğal credits al-Nahda's victory in the 2011 elections, with 37 per cent of the popular vote—four times the score achieved by its nearest rival—to the 'mirage' of the Turkish model, 'which had kept the region under its spell for the previous decade'. A substantial part of the Tunisian electorate craved 'a Turkish-style combination of religiosity, economic success and global acceptability', while the head of Libya's National Transitional Council declared in 2012 that his country would 'take Turkey as a model for its own political and democratic structure'.

But none of the AKP's epigones were able to match its record of consolidating power. Tuğal attributes this failure to the different structures of political society in Egypt and Tunisia. The Muslim Brotherhood, finding itself challenged by Salafi currents, had never managed to dominate the Islamist space in the same manner as the AKP; after 2011, the Nour Party kept the Brotherhood under pressure and limited its ability to manoeuvre.

When Erdoğan visited Cairo in September 2011 and put forward the AKP's gradualist message, arguing that a secular state offered the best political framework for pious Muslims, the Egyptian Islamists reacted with hostility. This partly reflected their own anti-secularism, but as Tuğal notes, 'the cold response was also a reflex shaped by the existing balance of religious power, which would have led to the further empowerment of the Salafis and the Jamaa had the Brotherhood let Erdoğan's comments pass in silence.' This was not the only departure from the Turkish pattern. While the AKP had been keen to bring the army under its control, the Brotherhood preferred to reach a *modus vivendi* with the Egyptian military, denouncing protests against its political role as *fitna*, 'disorder'. This would not save them in 2013, when Mohammed Morsi's clumsy and autocratic presidency provided the generals with an opportunity to mobilize and seize power for themselves. The coup was followed by large-scale repression of the Brotherhood's supporters.

Meanwhile in Tunisia, the al-Nahda administration was forced to grapple with a complex political terrain, which included one of the strongest labour organizations in the Arab world. The assassination of two prominent left-wing politicians led to bitter anti-government protests. At the same time, Ghannouchi's party had to respond to pressure from Salafi radicals who had taken over hundreds of mosques and were demanding the transformation of state television and Tunisia's universities. The AKP never had to face a mobilization of that kind during its early years in office—or the secularist counter-mobilization which it provoked. A broad anti-Islamist front, which included old-regime elements, secularists and a part of Tunisia's left, defeated al-Nahda in the 2014 elections. This act of political closure was not as decisive as the one in Egypt the previous year, but it now seems unlikely that Tunisia will follow the Turkish road.

The regional shift that had appeared so promising for the AKP in 2011 thus proved to be a bitter disappointment to it. The real winner, as Tuğal explains, was Saudi Arabia, representing the most illiberal face of Islam. Erdoğan could only watch helplessly as Morsi's government was overthrown by the Egyptian military with enthusiastic Saudi backing. Delusions of imperial grandeur quickly melted away. After some initial hesitation, Erdoğan swung behind the US–Saudi position on Syria, demanding Assad's removal from power, and provided support and sanctuary for rebel groups fighting to overthrow his regime. Five years later, Assad has not been ousted, and the most significant outcome of the Syrian conflict from Ankara's perspective has been most unwelcome: the emergence of a Kurdish autonomous zone close to the Turkish-Syrian border, governed by the sister party of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), whose guerillas have been fighting its army for decades.

Turkey's toxic 'Kurdish question' is now part of a complex regional equation. The struggle for Kurdish autonomy has long been a determining factor in Turkish politics: the 1980 military coup mowed down an entire generation of Turkish and Kurdish leftists; Diyarbakır Prison became a notorious torture centre. The PKK emerged from this crucible as a powerful armed resistance capable of challenging the Turkish state, which has responded with a policy of intermittent military repression towards the Kurds, very rarely acknowledging the issue to be one of democratic rights. Left-wing forces in Turkey have maintained an on-off alliance with Kurdish activists over the decades, while keeping their distance from the guerrilla movement. Erdoğan and the AKP appeared to take a promising line on the Kurdish issue in earlier years, increasing the party's attraction to liberals and leftists. In 2013, as the situation in Syria deteriorated and Washington stepped up the search for effective regional allies, negotiations began between the PKK's imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan and the AKP government, though the outcomes were kept hidden from the public eye. However, Erdoğan has now regressed to presenting the 'Kurdish problem' as one caused exclusively by the PKK's existence.

The Turkish leader received an honorary doctorate in political science from Marmara University in 2013, just weeks after he had dismissed the concept of the division of powers as a barrier that would prevent him from serving the people. This theoretical vision had already been put into practice by his administration, as the courts were brought into line with the executive through constitutional changes and hundreds of people were bundled into jail on political charges. Because of the highly undemocratic 10 per cent threshold required to enter Parliament, legislative power was monopolized by the AKP. Media companies were taken over by businessmen loyal to the government; journalists who differed from Erdoğan's line were threatened with prosecution. With all the formal channels of political expression seemingly shut down, opposition to the AKP manifested itself on the streets, in the form of the Gezi uprising. Tuğal concludes his study with an analysis of the Gezi movement, which he rightly views as a watershed in Turkish politics.

While some Turkish intellectuals tried to explain Gezi to the international media through a clichéd analysis of the 'clash of secular and religious mind-sets', the spectrum of the protestors, coming from a wide range of political backgrounds, showed that it stemmed from resistance to the conformity demanded by Erdoğan and his party. The accumulated anger that had been brewing beneath the surface reached boiling point, and the concept of mass civil disobedience was revived for the first time since the 1980 military coup. There was an immediate and dramatic change in the political climate: once

again, resistance was sanctified as something good, beautiful and right. The word 'resistance' itself (*direnış* in Turkish) re-entered the popular vocabulary, having been expunged from the public sphere after 1980. The AKP's propaganda machine was challenged by an eruption of political humour. Tuğal argues that the style of the protests was as important as its multi-class and multi-issue character: 'Social movements in Turkey had been becoming more colourful and festive ever since the mid-1990s. But this was the first time that a mass uprising was marked by fully carnivalesque tendencies.'

While it was certainly full of novelty, the Gezi uprising was not short of historical reference-points either. During the protests, the facade of the Atatürk Cultural Centre in Taksim Square was covered with the picture of a young man alongside a banner that read, 'stand tall!' The young man was Deniz Gezmiş, a student militant who was executed by the Turkish military in 1972 and has become a symbol of the revolutionary left. There was a notable absence, however: since the Kurdish movement did not want to squander the historic opportunity of talks between government representatives and the PKK, its supporters largely held back from joining the protests. Tuğal argues that Erdoğan's government was able to defuse the protest movement by presenting it in the same secular vs. religious terms as the Western media: 'In the popular imaginary, Gezi was anti-AKP and therefore anti-Islamist. This perception simply played into the hands of the regime.' Concluding his analysis in the early months of 2015, he takes a rather pessimistic view of Gezi's broader impact: 'Eventually, the revolt subsided and the various attempts to turn it into a sustained movement could not reach the broader masses'; thereafter, the Turkish left 'retracted to its pre-2013 base.'

Subsequent events have qualified that verdict somewhat. While none of the leftist organizations or political parties could fully capitalize on the mobilization around Gezi, a new civil network, *Oy ve Ötesi*, was launched in the wake of the protests, and would prove a major irritant for the AKP during the elections of June 2015. Its observers fanned out all over the country to obstruct vote-rigging by the incumbent party. The result of the poll was a setback for the AKP, which lost its majority in parliament, while 13 per cent of the vote went to the new People's Democratic Party (HDP), left-wing and pro-Kurdish. One of its main slogans, addressed to Erdoğan—'we won't allow you to be President'—had a wide popular resonance. The HDP's leader Selahattin Demirtaş established a strong public profile, helping the party to scale the 10 per cent threshold for representation in parliament.

Erdoğan's presidential ambitions could not be satisfied in the framework of a coalition government and he called a second election five months later. The November 2015 poll took place in a climate of intensified nationalism after the revival of hostilities between the PKK and the Turkish army. The thinking behind the PKK's renewed offensive has not been set out publicly,

but it appeared that the guerrilla leadership was not as pleased with the HDP's performance as its voters. Opponents of the new war rallied in Ankara the week before the election, and became victims of the deadliest terrorist attack in Turkish history, as suicide bombers suspected of links to ISIS killed 102 people. Riot police assaulted the survivors, while Erdoğan's ministers claimed that the protesters had bombed themselves. The AKP took advantage of a national-security panic to gain a majority of seats, largely at the expense of the far-right MHP; the HDP's vote was also depressed, though it still managed to clear the 10 per cent hurdle. Erdoğan's message of 'stability' may have delivered his party victory at the polls, but there has been no end to the fighting in the south-east since the 2015 election—nor to the bombings in cities like Istanbul. The perception of life has changed dramatically. Human rights organizations have documented hundreds of civilian casualties in the Kurdish-majority regions since the summer of 2015, including more than fifty children. The army's siege is predictably invisible in the mainstream Turkish media: recently, a teacher was fired from her job and threatened by AKP loyalists after ringing a live phone-in show to draw attention to the issue. There is great reluctance to speak about the Kurdish question in intellectual circles. Turkey appears to be regressing back to the bloody days of the 1990s. The political discourse on both Turkish and Kurdish sides has been militarized, to the benefit of the AKP's nationalism: once again, it is a question of Turks versus Kurds. The murder rate of women has risen tenfold under the AKP. Meanwhile, there are now almost three million Syrian refugees sheltering in Turkey. For Erdoğan, the refugee crisis is just another chip on the bargaining table with the West, while the refugees themselves, who increasingly form a nation within a nation on the streets of Istanbul, are rendered politically invisible.

The 'fall of the Turkish model' announced by Tuğal in his book's title could have multiple, overlapping meanings. Has the model failed because it could not be exported to the rest of the Middle East—Egypt and Tunisia in particular? Was that because of its inherent flaws, or because social and political conditions were very different in those countries, as Tuğal demonstrates? However tarnished it may now be, we should not assume that the AKP's political model has 'fallen', in the sense of being incapable of retaining power or mass support. Its followers have been encouraged to believe that social rights are a form of political charity that should only be available to those who vote AKP. They are mobilized by a gigantic propaganda machine which promotes a visceral hatred of the party's adversaries; Erdoğan can break his promises whenever he sees fit, and anyone who dares to raise the matter will find themselves branded as the enemy. It is considered perfectly acceptable for AKP leaders to incite crowds to boo the family of a fifteen-year-old, Berkin Elvan, who was killed by a police bullet during the

Gezi uprising. Turkey's Constitutional Court was also anathematized when it ordered the release of journalists Can Dündar and Erdem Gül. Between August 2015 and February 2016, sixty people were charged with insulting Erdoğan and prosecuted, with each 'criminal' facing a year or two in prison. Recently, a woman in the process of divorcing her husband accused him of insulting the President, hoping to get the upper hand in the divorce proceedings. Business owners of all kinds are kept in line, with the AKP's sword hanging over their heads.

The climate of sycophancy towards Erdoğan can give rise to moments of black comedy. When the AKP chief declared in a speech that Turkey had no need for 4G mobile networks because it would jump straight from 3G to 5G, one of the phone companies made sure to plaster billboards with advertisements for '4.5G'—a technology that doesn't exist—rather than contradict the President. Ironically, since the AKP has cultivated an image of itself as the liberator of Turkey from military hegemony, this vision of politics bears a close resemblance to the one promoted by the generals who seized power in 1980. They, too, sought to nurture a generation of Turks who would be 'without ideology'—in other words, conservative, nationalist, devout and obedient, and ready to embrace the free-market economy under NATO command. The leadership cult promoted by Erdoğan and his disciples today has its roots in this social and political soil.