



## Tunisi's dream, Erdogan's nightmare

[Halil İbrahim Yenigün](#) 29 May 2017.

“Our principles remind us that not justice, but oppression will inevitably result from an unrestrained one-man rule that is unaccountable, unchecked and unstoppable...”.



Khayruddin Pasha al-Tunisi (d. 1890) was in many ways a typical nineteenth century Ottoman statesman and reformist thinker, but indisputably unique in many other ways. Serving in the remote principality of Tunisia, he was an adamant advocate for a constitutional regime like his Young Ottoman counterparts in Istanbul. But he stood out in his quest to ground his views on a quite firm Islamic foundation.

His classical political treatise, *The Surest Path (Aqwam al-Masalik)* was no less than a modern comparative politics manuscript. He would quote an unlikely figure, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d.1350) to justify his reformism: “any path where the road signs of justice are perceptible is the path of the *shar*’ and religion of God.”<sup>[1]</sup> This not only opened up an immense space for rational deliberation in Islamic political thinking but placed him among the proto-Islamist political thinkers as well.

He is known to have helped install the first parliament and constitution in a Muslim-majority administration, Ottoman Tunisia, even before that of the imperial capital. In the *Muqaddima* to his book, he probed the causes of the rise and fall of nations following his forerunner, Ibn Khaldun (d.1406.) Drawing on his study of the European countries, he identified liberty as the root cause of progress, development, and civilization. Liberty, as a principle of political justice, would be attained by state institutions through “good government,”<sup>[2]</sup> which in turn could be secured through *shura* (deliberative decision-making as embodied by parliaments), limited government, transparency and the accountability of public offices. Political and civil liberties for the governed would be guaranteed, especially freedom of the press. Thus, inasmuch as he spelt out these principles as elements of good government, his prescription for saving the Muslim world from decline was primarily a political task, not military or economic. Inasmuch as he spelt out these principles as elements of good government, his prescription for saving the Muslim world from decline was primarily a political task, not military or economic.

Even though Istanbul’s Islamists of the Second Constitutional Era (1908-1920) are not known for being the direct intellectual descendants of Tunisi as much as of Jamaladdin al-Afghani (d. 1897), Tunisi’s increasing fame eventually led Abdulhamid II (1876-1909) to appoint him in 1878-1879 as the Grand Vizier. However, just like Afghani, Tunisi would soon fall into disrepute at the Sultan’s court, due to his insistence on good government and constitutionalism. Like the former, he would spend the rest of his days in Istanbul and pass away there.

## Subsequent influence

Notwithstanding their similar agendas, the Young Ottoman Namık Kemal (d. 1888), in his imperial hubris, did not particularly like this Tunisian statesman: “We would not stoop to begging for a Vizier from Tunisia,” he complained in one of [his letters](#), although he would come to admit Tunisi’s moral pre-eminence. Nonetheless, as the fierce opponents of Abdulhamid II’s despotic government, Istanbul’s Afghani-inspired early Islamists surely followed the same line of reasoning: good government, in particular *shura* and constitutionalism, was *the* solution to the problem of Muslim decline, and would put them back on the track of civilization and progress.

Abdulhamid’s violation of these ethico-political principles and his heavy-handed despotism (*istibdad*) was the chief reason behind the invectives and derogatory poems leading Islamist Mehmed Akif’s (d. 1936) directed against him –poems that would definitely send Akif packing to a life-long imprisonment for insulting the ruler if recited a hundred years down the road against Erdoğan.

Islamism went through a revival in Turkey through Sayyid Qutb (d.1966) and his contemporaries’ transnational influence some fifty years later. However, its political ethics were rarely high on the agenda in the public debates. Instead, it was discussed mostly as a political problem or a sociological phenomenon during those decades leading up to Erdoğan’s hard slog to near-absolute power. Even during the Justice and Development Party (AKP)’s first decade, Islamism was hardly the main preoccupation of the AKP elite, as they had already turned away to found a religious conservative party.

However, [a sudden spark](#) in July 2012 would create an outpouring of pieces on Turkish Islamism just as the intelligentsia seemed to need to rediscover its whereabouts, as well as clarifying the AKP’s ambiguous relationship with it. The initial two sides of this debate were both non-Gülenist columnists of the Gülenist

*Zaman* newspaper: the doyen ideologue of Turkish Islamism Ali Bulaç and his anti-Islamist, ex-ultranationalist interlocutor, Mümtazer Türköne. Ironically, they are both under arrest now, facing possible life sentences for aiding the Gülenist network, and paying the price for their disobedience to Erdoğan under the pretext of ‘post-coup measures’.

A true sympathizer of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Hassan al-Banna (d. 1949) and Qutb, Bulaç promoted the formation of such civil societal groups as opposed to the purely political, top-down, and power-ridden AKP. Türköne, in contrast, saw Islamism as the hurdle on the way to a democratic society, but still advised Turkish Islamists to choose Namık Kemal as the “indigenous” proto-Islamist over the highly controversial “import”, Afghani. That final wave of debate on Islamism subsided long ago amidst the incessant political crises that subsequently shrunk any public debate worth mentioning on any issue.

## Political regression

Against this background, Turkey seems to have experienced yet another major political regression with the April 16 referendum and its predictable long-term effects on Turkish politics. As heir to the Islamist political party tradition, the AKP’s codification of a one-man regime has immense import for the centuries-old Islamic reform (*islah*) movement as well as Islamism.

Except for a few minor and ostracized groups, the great majority of Turkish Islamists have mobilized their collective forces to establish Erdoğan as Turkey’s almost completely unaccountable and unlimited leader. Neither the oppressive political context that would render even some minor local elections unfree and unfair, nor reports of fraud widespread enough to jeopardize any political regime and its leader’s legitimacy seem to have bothered them. In this sense, what has happened last month in the referendum is of crucial significance that can be summed up in a sentence: the so-called heirs of Ottoman-Turkish Islamism, which struggled to curb autocratic rule and to establish good government, have mobilized all their political and intellectual resources to expand the power of one man alone to secure his personality-centred regime. The so-called followers of a tradition known for ethically-grounded political propositions for the “Muslim world’s revival” have now turned towards the pure and naked power politics of a one-man regime.

Limiting the autocrat’s power has always been deemed a panacea for most followers of the Muslim reform movement. Now those who trace their lineage to this tradition have sought to enlist the Islamist public’s support for the removal of the few remaining constraints, forms of accountability, and checks-and-balances in an already shattered political regime. The so-called followers of a tradition known for ethically-grounded political propositions for the “Muslim world’s revival” have now turned towards the pure and naked power politics of a one-man regime. I argue that the real significance for Islamism of the recent Turkish referendum must be sought in this anomaly.

## Paths diverge

Let us illustrate this anomaly by contrasting examples of the religious discourses that are deployed for or against the referendum. The “Islamic” case for the recent referendum to enlist the Islamist support was often made via calls for a [“greater and stronger Turkey”](#), the “survival of state and nation,” or [“the unity of ummah”](#). It was, in a short, a case for “Muslim power” under Turkey’s leadership even in its most Islamist tones, where nation, ummah, Turkey, and the Muslim world’s fate were merged together and embodied in Erdoğan. This is a concept of the ‘political’ that is stripped of any ethical reference such as good government or justice. The basic conditions of free and fair elections or at the very least, basic honesty, seem to have failed to figure in their notion of Islamic politics.

In contrast, those remaining ostracized Islamist groups that campaigned for a ‘no’ vote, e.g. Labor and Justice Coalition (LJC), Platform for Rights and Justice, and the Muslims’ Initiative against Violence against Women (MIVW), have employed a different language that underlines the Qur’anic verse of *shura* as their ethico-political vantage point. While LJC referred to the [“perennial tradition of shura”](#) in its justification of the no vote,

the recently formed “Platform for Rights and Justice,” issued a statement that was presciently entitled: [“Not Autocratic Rule, but Shura, Rights, and Justice.”](#)

It said,

...Turkey needs a new constitution. However, the constitutional package... is far beyond realizing justice for all....Those who have to object to it are first and foremost those who try to uphold rights and justice. Even if we have been subjected to injustices in this society because of our identity, it is an unethical temptation to condone injustices that others will face for the sake of the power we will seize. We must not stand for the right of the might, but the power of the right. Our principles remind us that not justice, but oppression will inevitably result from an unrestrained one-man rule that is unaccountable, unchecked and unstoppable... As the religious references will never approve of a one-man rule, and as the Medina Compact enjoins plurality, power-sharing, and consultative rule, the defense of one-man rule is unfounded... We Muslims have to deliberate with each other for our affairs and there is the chapter on Shura in the Qur’an.... For the sake of power-sharing and *shura*, and against an autocratic power, for the sake of rights and justice, we say “NO.”

The women’s group concluded its opposition statement with a [declaration](#):

Monotonous voices and monopolization of power never favored women, since the overbearing power that suppressed the other voices has first targeted the everyday life of women... As the women who formed a solidarity chain on the Bosphorus Bridge during the February 28 era when the regime targeted hijabi women, we are determined to form a chain of justice and righteousness with those women who are dismissed from their jobs through decrees, who have had to give birth under detention, and who feel their forms of life are threatened... The Prophet who had been entrusted with rectifying the defective scale of justice never suppressed different voices in the name of stability, nor did he impose himself on people, ... [but he] remained loyal to the principle that “Carry out your affairs through shura” (Shura, 38).

Such a striking contrast between modes of justification from the Islamist groups’ YES and NO voters is further confirmation of the antinomy [I have sought](#) to draw between Muslimism (a quest for power) and Islamism (a quest for justice). There was indeed hardly any defense of a YES vote among the former based on good and just government, while most of the NO votes among Islamists referred to these ethico-political principles.

## Turning back to Tunisi

Around a century ago, Muslims from Egypt to Turkey and Iran were going through a “constitutionalism spring”. It faded in a decade or so but its institutional legacy lived on in parliaments and constitutions. Even the most radical Islamist thinkers such as Qutb did not oppose them *in toto*, but condemned the human arrogation of the powers of the deity through them. He nevertheless argued for shura-based polities.

Turkey had given hopes to the rest of the world that a popular government coming from an Islamist lineage would finally consolidate good government and democracy. The Arab Spring expanded these hopes that its success could be replicated by fellow religious politicians. At its outset, many thought Egypt would be more like Turkey. As these hopes faded, Turkey became much more like Egypt. At its outset, many thought Egypt would be more like Turkey. As these hopes faded, Turkey became much more like Egypt.

Perhaps despite the remnants of imperial hubris, Turkey could once again turn towards Tunisia to search for a conception of Muslim politics that embraces good government, compromise, and consensus-building, rather than a zero-sum game of Muslim domination over others, as well as an ethics-free Muslim power.

Tunisi kept high hopes for Istanbul to take the lead for good government in the Muslim world. He failed as the autocratic one-man rule reigned for thirty more years, leaving a much more feeble legacy of constitutionalism than it could have done.

A hundred years later Turkey missed yet another big chance to establish a decent regime that would institutionalize the principles of good government and democracy. Those who argued for the possibility of an “Islamic democracy” once again received a heavy blow from the cynics who had already doomed Muslim-majority polities to an irredeemable “Oriental despotism.” Tunisia’s dreams will have to wait for another spring in Turkey if not in Tunisia, while the latter still fights for its democracy’s survival.

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[1] Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi and Leon Carl Brown. *The Surest Path* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 126.

[2] *Ibid.*, 74

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