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Friday, January 27 2012, Your time is 8:30:49 PM PST

The risk for Turkey is illiberal democracy

These days, a plenitude of observers is discussing "where [Turkey](#) is heading." Some of them are confused about the seemingly contradictory phenomena that are taking place under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. On the one hand, the political system is being de-militarized, and the power of the ballots is being consolidated. On the other hand, [Turkey](#) still is a country of "thought crimes," with a growing number of journalists and public intellectuals in jail.

"What is really going on?" a foreign friend of mine asked me lately. "Is [Turkey](#) becoming more democratic or less democratic?"

In return, I said that this was not the right question. [Turkey](#) was undoubtedly becoming more democratic, I explained. But the real question was whether it would be a liberal or illiberal democracy.

An illiberal democracy, as best described by Fareed Zakaria, is a political system in which free and fair elections take place, but civil liberties are not fully protected and governmental power is not limited with liberal principles. It is a much better model than any dictatorship, but it is far from the blessings of liberal democracy, as found in many [EU](#) states.

However, here is a key point that is often missed, and sometimes missed willfully: The reason to worry about illiberal democracy in [Turkey](#) is not what the AKP government has done in the past decade. Quite contrary, the problem is what the AKP government has NOT done: They have not reformed Turkey's authoritarian laws on "state security" and the state-worshipping judiciary which implements these laws mindlessly.

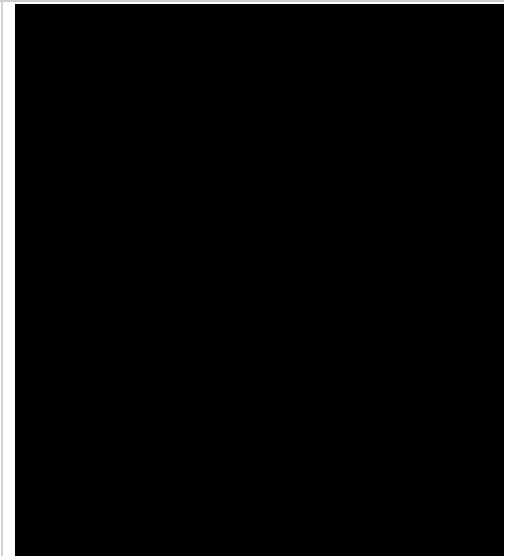
This is the reason why almost 100 journalists are in jail now: Almost all of these people are charged with "propaganda on behalf of a terrorist organization," which is criminalized by Turkey's draconian laws since time immemorial.

The recent report by Thomas Hammarberg, the commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, titled "Administration of Justice and Protection of Human Rights in Turkey," exposes this problem brilliantly. Mr. Hammarberg explains that problems relating to the justice system in [Turkey](#) are "long-standing, systemic." He goes on to note that, in fact, the AKP government, "tackl[ed] some of these problems in recent years," and "substantial constitutional, legislative, institutional and practical reforms... have already taken place." However, he warns, "these reforms have not yet reached their full and desired potential."

In other words, the propaganda you would hear from the sworn enemies of the AKP – that [Turkey](#) was heaven on earth until a decade ago, but has turned into a dictatorship under the "Islamists" – is flatly wrong. The [Turkey](#) of the 1990s was much worse than the [Turkey](#) of today by any democratic and liberal standard. (For example, the generals who ran [Turkey](#) in the '90s were not jailing the journalists that they found pro-PKK. They were rather getting them executed by death squads.)

Perhaps this is the way to summarize the situation: In the past, [Turkey](#) was both undemocratic and illiberal. (It was perhaps more "secular" than today, but, well, North Korea is secular, too.) Today's Turkey, on the other hand, is more democratic yet still illiberal.

Here, the trouble with the AKP is not that it is too "Islamist." The trouble is that the



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governing party, which has clashed with a powerful state establishment for years and found the solution in liberal reforms, is now enjoying the very power that it once found menacing. As Andrew Finkel put it well in the New York Times, with a reference to the Lord of The Rings, this is a "Frodo Baggins moment" for the AKP: "It knows it should throw the ring of power into the fire, but the ring feels increasingly comfortable on its finger."

And what will happen to that ring is Turkey's question of the year.

January/14/2012

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Rorschach ~

1/17/2012
9:11:16 PM

I wouldn't call what turkey has as "free elections." the people should be able to vot for the 'individuals' they want to have representing them. When you can only vote for a party, it's the party leaders who decide. That's not a democracy.

JRC JRC

1/17/2012
10:54:41 AM

Mr. Akyol, the AKP have held majority power for 10 years. This is more than enough to reform all judicial processes and change laws to meet better standards. They choose not to as they as "illiberal" as any party before them. Get power, keep power.

Hasan Kutlay

1/14/2012
11:06:59 PM

The argument of persistently referring to the past is losing its credit. That is not an excuse for current wrongdoings.

Hakan Salci

1/14/2012
7:46:46 PM

Akyol, Yet again you will do anything to justify the dictatorial behaviour of the AK party government; towards the end however even you cannot escape this undeniable fact. If laws were already in place why no wave of arrests during past governments?

GERARD
SELTZER

1/14/2012
6:04:29 PM

Using word games to justify opinions is fallacious. Turkey is not a democracy. The hallmark of a democracy is freedom of speech and a free press. These, then, lead to free elections. You are all fearful of being arrested for anitgovernment articles.

R Collins

1/14/2012
2:50:56 PM

Not convincing. If in place since "time immemorial," then why so many detentions of journalists now? Former army chief's alleged actions years ago? Why arrest now? If not previously democratic, how did the AKP come to power?

american
american

1/14/2012
1:11:55 PM

North Korea was not nor is not secular. They just don't believe in your 'god'. A modern personality cult is just as religious as an archaic one.

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Adam Gotham

1/14/2012
1:09:34 PM

Frodo Baggins moment reminds us the time that reveals the true character of the politics and politicians. After all "politicians are people who, when they see light at the end of the tunnel, go out and buy some more tunnel", John Quinton

delia ruhe

1/14/2012
12:03:23 PM

Virtually all democracies go through illiberal phases. During times of war and/or economic crisis, when the electorate is feeling frightened, they lurch to the right and vote conservative. Many conservatives are not "natural" democrats.

dogan kemal ileri

1/14/2012
4:42:29 AM

The AKP government are there to enrich the lives of and empower the people of Turkiye and by and large they're doing an excellent job. But its not easy to change the mindset of some of the reactionary and ignorant element present. Lets be patient.

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