

Sunday, 9 June 2013

Egypt's Islamists, opposition closely eye Turkey



Liberal-minded Egyptians and supporters of the ruling Muslim Brotherhood now share one thing: the rival sides are closely following protests in Turkey, a country that has provided the heavily polarized and increasingly impoverished Egyptians with a tantalizing model for marrying Islamist government with a secular establishment and achieving prosperity along the way.

Turkey, a NATO member with a mostly Muslim population has been touted as a democratic model for Egypt and other Arab countries swept up in popular revolts over the past two years. But scenes of tens of thousands of Turks filling Istanbul's central Taksim Square for more than a week of anti-government protests reminiscent of the mass demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square that led to the 2011 ouster of authoritarian leader Hosni Mubarak have alarmed Islamists in both countries. The rapid unraveling of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's image at home has spilled into Egypt in what experts say is a warning to Egyptian President Mohammad Mursi and his Muslim Brotherhood as they balance the need to meet the demands of both the deeply conservative and the secular communities in the Arab world's most populous nation. "This is certainly a bad omen for Islamists," said Mohammad Abdel-Kader Khalil, a Cairo-based senior researcher at the East Center for Strategic and Regional Studies. "Their model is violently shaking as the man they say they want to emulate has been dealt a blow." Experts are more sanguine: Given the vast differences in history and circumstances, Taksim Square, they warn, is no Tahrir. "Various parties attempt to make a connection between the so-called Turkish model and the Egyptian. They are very mistaken. The two are vastly different," said Amr Ismail Adly, a Turkish affairs scholar in Cairo. "Portraying this as a struggle between secularism and Islam is also oversimplifying a much more complex issue given the diversity of protesters and motives." For the first time in a decade of power, however, Erdogan appears vulnerable and embattled despite the country's stunning economic performance and heightened international profile. The demonstrations began May 31 with a violent police crackdown against a small protest over a plan to develop the landmark Taksim Square and spread to dozens of cities amid discontent over what critics see as the prime minister's increasing authoritarianism and efforts to encroach on secular lifestyles. His critics point to attempts to curtail the selling and promotion of alcohol, his comments on how women should dress and statements that each woman should have at least three children. A devout Muslim who says he is committed to upholding Turkey's secular tradition, Erdogan vehemently rejects charges of autocracy and points out that he enjoyed 50 percent support in the last elections in 2011. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood has been cool to Turkey's secular leaning but gave Erdogan a hero's welcome when he visited Egypt last year, erecting giant billboards with his image on Cairo's main bridges and boulevards. The Brotherhood's deputy leader Khairat el-Shater depicted himself as "Egypt's Erdogan" during his short-lived presidential campaign last year before he was thrown out of the race over a Mubarak-era conviction. The opposition and many other Egyptians, meanwhile, have been skeptical about the analogy with the Turkish model, calling it a Brotherhood tactic to assuage fears in the West and at home that it would try to impose strict Islamic rule even as its members dominate the country's power structures. Khalil, the Cairo-based researcher, said the Brotherhood actually "inverted the model" by trying to monopolize power through the infusion of its members in state institutions under the pretext of battling the "deep state," a term used in Turkey to refer to a network of military and civilian allies accused of trying to destabilize the country during the early years of Erdogan's rule. The term is repeatedly used by Brotherhood leaders to refer to the legacy of Mubarak's 29-year regime. "They wanted to consolidate power, take control of state institutions while the streets are boiling and the economy in shambles," said Khalil, the researcher. "They are in a rush and they didn't really benefit from Turkey's experience." Opposition activists look to the Turkey protests - with a daily stream of pictures of injured Turkish protesters and people acting as human shields against water cannons - as a way to boost their continued movement and demonstrations against Morsi's rule, which they claim has over a very short time reproduced the authoritarian regime ousted in 2011. "The impact is doubled in Egypt," said prominent activist Hossam el-Hamalawy. "On one