

ABSTRACT

Can the Pious Theorize?: Liberal Democracy, Power and Muslim Intellectuals in Contemporary Turkey

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This paper explores the contours of a critical discursive field around liberal-democracy emanating from the work of Muslim intellectuals aligned with the project of building the Generation of Qur'an in Turkey since the 1970s. To that end, it analyses the writings (books and journal articles) of a group of Islamist intellectuals affiliated with Islamist civil society associations (Ozgur-Der, Mazlum-Der, Ak-Der) and journals (Haksoz, Iktibas, Genc Birikim).

For scholars analyzing the resurgence of Islamic revivalism towards the end of the 20th century, the main question of interest has been articulated around the compatibility of Islam and democracy and the role of such Islamic movements in the democratic/political trajectory of Muslim societies. With the exception of Iran and Sudan as the cases of Islamists in power, the classical typology of political Islam in scholarly literature depicted such movements as either fundamentalist organizations or as legitimate participants into existing political systems. This paper proposes to transcend this moderate-fundamental axis of categorization by voicing the intellectual efforts of Islamist civil society actors devoted to the tawhidi awakening in Turkey, at problematizing the politics at work in this very act of naming and interpellating. In that respect, the Islamist discourse under analysis manifests local modalities of refusing to bear the burden of proving the compatibility of Islam with liberal-democratic norms.

By making this hitherto unanalyzed peripheral discourse the focus of my paper, I attempt to answer the following questions: How is an Islamic epistemology of resistance through shahadat (witnessing) fashioned, through the translation of Sayyid Qutb's project of building the 'Generation of Qur'an' in Turkey, in direct response to the paradigmatic status of international regimes of moderation and liberalization? What are the intellectual reactions to the operationalization of moderation in such regional governance projects as the Greater Middle East Project and the "model partnership" recently proposed by Obama? In inspecting those questions, my objective is to explore local attempts at countering liberal-democratic moderation via a politics of tabligh (invitation) operating through the active collaboration of Islamist publishing and pious reading publics. Extrapolating from this, I aim to juxtapose this critical discourse to the emerging Islamic democratic discourse/theory of Muslim scholars (El-Fadl, Sachedina, Hashemi (USA), Al-Ghannouchi (France), Soroush (Iran), Al-Bishri (Egypt) among others) in the hope to include peripheral voices into, and thereby broadening the spectrum of, the existing body of contemporary Islamic political thought for a more rigorous comparative political theory.

Keywords: liberal democracy, moderation, Islamist critical theory, Muslim intellectuals, Turkey