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## **Islamic Actors' Support for Democracy and European Integration: A Case for Power-Seeking?**

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Abstract

**Islamic Actors' Support for Democracy and European Integration:  
A Case for Power-Seeking?**

by Arolda Elbasani and Beken Saatçioğlu

This paper investigates when and how Islamic political actors support democracy, and in particular, the EU's democratic criteria subsumed under membership conditionality. The research focuses on the main Islamic organizations in two Muslim-majority, EU applicant states, Turkey and Albania. The analysis suggests that Islamic actors endorsed democratic rules based on a rationalist logic, which combines interest-driven and ideational concerns. The weak Albanian actors have shown unconditional support for democracy and related EU-demanded reforms, which ultimately improved their fragile domestic power position. In contrast, Turkey's considerably stronger, Islamic-rooted Justice and Development Party supported democracy and EU conditions more selectively, and so long as it needed the empowerment associated with democratic and EU rules. These findings highlight the strong relationship between Islamic actors' political power considerations and support for democracy.

*Keywords: Islam, European integration, Turkey, Albania, power-seeking*

## **Introduction**

The rise of democratic claims across Islamic countries in the Middle East has renewed scholarly attention on the intricate and controversial relation between Islam and democracy. The extension of the EU enlargement policy, together with a package of democratic reform requirements, to democratizing Islamic-majority polities in the Balkans has also brought to the agenda Islamic actors' inclination for democracy. Although these two empirical phenomena recap different countries, regions and processes, they highlight a common puzzle on the conditions that 'lure' Islamic actors into democrats. There are, however, very few studies analyzing the role of Islamic actors in processes of democratization. As Kunkler and Leininger suggest, 'Few attempts have been made to systemize the factors that determine the contribution of religious actors to democratization process' (2009:1958). Without a comparative and systematic analysis, Islamic actors' support for democracy and parallel processes of European integration is interpreted as a result of country- and actor-idiosyncratic factors, while findings on Islamic actors' democratic politics lack the possibility of generalization across different country contexts and forms of actorship.

Heading this observation, we outline a common conceptual framework for analyzing Islamic actors' support for democratic rule. We treat Islamic actors as rational ones who choose and act on the basis of preferences, which consist of both power-based and ideological concerns. Accordingly, democratic rules, but also enlargement criteria, can serve as a 'window of opportunity' for Islamic actors to maximize their set of preferences and fortify their political position in a given domestic opportunity structure. Hence, we assume that Islamic actors support democratic rules when and if this garners them political power and/or lends legitimacy to their ideas. In addition, we consider power-based concerns as the primary catalyst for democratic support, and liberal ideology as a secondary factor, which becomes crucially important when Islamic actors are powerful enough to pursue their norms independently.

This article seeks to explain how power concerns and ideational allegiances have shaped Islamic actors' position in the parallel battle for democratization and European integration in two cases: Albania, since the fall of communism in the early 1990s; and Turkey, since the establishment of Islamic-rooted governing parties in 2002. Our analysis focuses on the

most powerful and politically affluent organizations – the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, and the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC) in Albania, although we occasionally bring in the analysis alternative actors, which have gained political importance at certain points in time. The comparison maximizes variation in our main explanatory factor –actors’ power position in the domestic constellation of power. AMC is a weak civil society organization, which suffers from both lack of resources and mobilization power in a society that has experienced decades of atheism; AKP is among the most powerful political parties enjoying a highly effective organization and superior mobilization power.

Our analysis shows that Islamic actors have adopted differential support for democracy, which correlates well with the degree of power they possess in the domestic arena. Fragile Islamic actors in Albania have perceived democracy and EU criteria as the best shield against a repeat of past repression and a general anti-Islamic atmosphere, showing absolute and unwavering support for democracy and EU integration. The comparatively strong AKP, which nevertheless needed the EU and democratization to consolidate its position vis-à-vis the secular establishment, has shown strong, but selective patterns of support during its first term in power (2002-2007), and increased divergence with EU norms once it had established itself as an unrivaled ruling party after the 2007 elections.

In the following section we explain our conceptual framework for analyzing Islamic actors’ preferences, and outline a set of hypotheses on the conditions that stimulate Islamic actors’ support for democracy and EU related reforms. In the subsequent section we trace the evolution of Albanian and Turkish Islamic actors along power-based and ideational dimensions, which set their broad opportunity structure and related preferences. In the third empirical section, we examine how these conditions have determined actual support for democracy. This will lead us to concluding reflections on the relation between power based and ideational allegiances and differential support for democracy across our cases.

## **Islam, Democratization and European Integration**

The relation between Islam and democratization has been the focus of a burgeoning literature that reflects both a general revival of religion in politics, and the rise of democracy in the Islamic world. Indeed, the third wave of democratization has swept through a number of Islamic countries, while more recent democratic movements in the Middle East have spread the map of democratization beyond an exemplary group of Islamic societies. Even some anti-democratic regimes known to be the most immune to democratization have seen popular democratic claims rise within the context of the Arab spring. Recent research on the rise of 'Islamic democracy' has contributed to challenge the previously held assumption on a certain incompatibility between Islam and democracy (Huntington 1996). Meanwhile, efforts to systematize the conditions under which Islamic entities support democracy underline a contextualized understanding of Islam, as religious dogmata that interacts with the respective socio-political contexts and takes diverse political and social forms, including pro-democratic interpretations (Stepan 2000: 48). In this line of argument, Islamic actors that face political competition, tend to adjust their political platforms to benefit from the chances and opportunities arising from the ballot box (Nasr 2005: 15). In other words, the rules of the democratic game induce them to engage with and use the opportunity of democratic procedures in order to solidify their position in the political arena, thus reinforcing their democratic credentials.

The process of EU enlargement, whereby the EU offers much wanted rewards (including financial assistance and highly regarded institutional ties) contingent on candidate countries' adoption of democratic reforms, can create additional incentives for domestic actors, including Islamic ones, to support democratic rules. In the context of its 2004 and 2007 rounds of enlargements, the EU has elaborated the most detailed package of democratic conditions that candidate states need to enact in order to receive the rewards at stake (Grabbe 2003: 307). The EU's control of substantial rewards, especially the advancement of institutional relations leading to full EU membership, has empowered it with a successful strategy of 'reinforcement by reward' (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005: 11). Both the intrusiveness of the rules attached to membership and the large benefits of accession, have arguably allowed the EU unprecedented influence over domestic change in the candidate countries (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2008: 88; Elbasani 2012: 7). The success of enlargement builds on the main assumption that the EU

rewards enable a redistribution of resources by empowering domestic actors who comply with EU rules. Hence, domestic actors' benefit from allying with the EU becomes the principal variable determining their support for EU integration and related criteria for domestic change (Sedelmeier 2011).

Both explanations on how democratic competition and EU incentives can lure Islamic actors to democracy emphasize the rationalist argument that religious actors, like all other political actors, choose on the basis of power-based preferences. Their preferences, moreover, change and shift according to the opportunity structures in a given political context and at a certain point in time. We subscribe to the overall argument that both the rules of democratic competition and EU rewards can provide a window of opportunity for Islamic actors to strengthen their position in a given domestic power structure. Yet, we assume that Islamic actors' preferences and related choices rest on a combination of purely power-based calculations and ideational allegiances. We thus bring in Islamic norms and beliefs as key factors informing Islamic actors' preferences and resulting positions vis-à-vis democracy and European integration.

#### *Religious Actors and Preference Formation*

Islamic actors, like other religious entities, are defined by a common set of beliefs that 'transcend the individual and the mundane' (Berger 1969). Yet, religious actorship here also denotes a certain relation to political power. Indeed, religious actors must almost always chart their course of action in relation to political authority. As political agents, they have a strong stake in and related preferences vis-à-vis major political choices. We maintain that their preferences hinge on three variables that set the broad opportunity structures in the socio-political environment in which they operate: 1) secular provisions; 2) organizational capacities; and 3) theological orientation (Kunkler and Leininger 2010).

Secularism is understood as separation of secular spheres (state, law, economy, science) from religious institutions and norms (Casanova 1996: 211-215). The legal and political environment that sets the confines of religious separation vis-à-vis the state has strong implications for the political fortunes of Islamic actors and the strategies available to them. Separation and differentiation do not necessarily mean suppression of religion by state authorities or even the decline of religion. Indeed, separation can co-exist well with

flourishing religious activity and active influence of religion on politics. Moreover, recent research has refined the thesis that democracy requires a firm separation between religion and politics, asserting instead that democracy requires 'twin tolerations' between the two (Stepan 2000: 40-43). Indeed, western democracies display very different secular arrangements with a clear-cut separation being more a myth than reality. In addition, democratic systems are often characterized by ongoing contestation and negotiation of the institutional arrangements regulating the division between religion and politics (Ibid.). Hence, the institutional arrangements ensuring religious separation and autonomy as well as ongoing change and redefinition of legal frameworks provide the broad confines of religious actors' opportunity structures in a given political system, and shape the form and degree of their involvement in politics.

From an organizational standpoint, Islamic actors can be any individual, group or organization that exposes Islamic beliefs and articulates a reasonably consistent and coherent message about their faith and politics (Toft *et al.* 2011: 39). Individual actors are usually religious authorities and intellectuals who have acquired the necessary theological qualifications to interpret Islamic sources and formulate related moral and behavioral recommendations. Collective actors comprise different organizational forms for addressing the spiritual, social, economic and political needs of an Islamic group. They can be civil society organizations, which aggregate believers around a set of Islamic values but have limited claim and access to political power. They can also take the form of political parties, which have a more direct claim to power and fuse religious belief with political authority. Besides their political functions, the strength of religious organizations' varies based on the number of believers they are able to mobilize around their aims and their degree of institutionalization or regulated competences (Kunkler and Leininger 2009: 1063). Indeed, the organizational form that religious actors comprise are found to be a significant condition in shaping their political power and influence (Ibid.).

Another determinant of Islamic actors' political preferences is their theology or ideas concerning the political regime and authority. Islamic actors' ideas are drawn not only from reflections on religious writings but also historical and contemporary circumstances in particular countries. As Toft *et al.* put it, 'in any particular context, political theology translates basic theological claims, beliefs and doctrines into political ideals and programs' (2011: 45). In this line of argument, the imperative of democratic competition might well



work to convert Islamic beliefs into political platforms designed to win regular elections (Nasr 2005: 16). Accordingly, the rise of Islamic democracy seems more like the inchoate offspring of various ad hoc alliances and pragmatic decisions oriented to thrive in a competitive political environment rather than an intellectual moderation of Islamic perspective, or a process approximating an Islamic Reformation. Whether the outcome of pragmatic choices, or a genuine reformist movement, liberal theology informs, at least to a certain extent, Islamic actors' preference formation on major political, social and moral dilemmas.

### *Islamic Actors' Preferences and Support for Democracy and EU Integration*

In our framework, existing secular arrangements and Islamic actors' organizational sources inform their power position vis-à-vis other domestic actors, and the extent to which they depend on democratic guarantees and external empowerment associated with support for the EU. Secularist arrangements establish the legal and political background under which they operate vis-à-vis the state, and form the main boundaries of their engagement in politics. Organizational sources, on the other hand, enable them to benefit from the available institutional opportunities, but also redefine and stretch the limits of secularism. When they are weak, i.e., subject to a strict separation and exclusion from the public sphere and endowed with limited resources to negotiate their position, they are more reliant on democracy and EU integration to strengthen their fragile domestic power. When they are strong, i.e., endowed with a well resourced organization and able to negotiate the secularist constraints on their political power, they are in less need of democratic and EU safeguards to strengthen their already comfortable position.

While power-based concerns are the primary motive for support of democratic rule and EU political criteria, Islamic norms and beliefs do also inform Islamic actors' preferences on democracy. To be sure, liberal theology can facilitate support for democratic rule regardless of religious actors' power position, but it becomes crucially important when Islamic actors are strong enough to pursue their independent norms and beliefs. In the case of powerful actors, which possess the necessary institutional and organizational capacities to be politically assertive, liberal theology becomes the main determinant of support for democratic rules while illiberal theology undermines meaningful support. In other words, when Islamic values are embedded in liberal theology and thus resonate with

democratic principles, religious actors can only gain from supporting the EU's demands. Indeed, support for democracy and EU rules can improve both the legitimacy of their ideas and increase their social basis and mobilization capacity. In contrast, when their embraced theology contradicts democratic rules support for democracy weakens the Islamic program and its social appeal, turning into a losing strategy.

Hence, we hypothesize:

- 1) When Islamic actors possess limited power, they need democratic guarantees and the EU's empowerment to strengthen their domestic position and hence, support democratic rules.*
- 2) When Islamic actors are politically powerful, they are in less need of democratization and the EU's empowerment for the realization of their political interests and hence support democratic rules that suit their theology.*
- 3) Liberal theology facilitates support for democracy, but it becomes a crucial determinant of support when Islamic actors are strong enough to pursue their independent political norms and ideas.*

#### *Comparison and Cases*

Since Islamic actors in both Albania and Turkey have mushroomed in different forms and capacities, we have chosen to focus on the most powerful and politically affluent organizations –the AKP, the most powerful Islamist-rooted party in Turkey; and the AMC, the formal organization managing all Islamic issues in Albania. Yet, we occasionally bring in the analysis other minor actors to the extent that they become politically influential and contribute to the political position of the main Islamic actors we focus on.

Our comparison of Islamic actors in Turkey and Albania rests on a most similar systems research design (Mill 1961), which enables variation in our main explanatory factor – organizational power; while keeping constant other factors – secular provisions and forms of theology. Hence, our cases are similar in most dimensions we analyze, but vary in terms of strength of organization, which we argue explains the variation in the dependent variable of support for democracy and EU requirements. In both countries Islamic actors operate under similarly strict secular constraints and have embraced broadly similar liberal Islamic theology. They however, possess different organizational strength and general political power in their respective environments. AKP in Turkey is endowed with

strong organizational sources and is well positioned as a strong governing party in the political spectrum. In addition, we analyze the AKP's case in two periods, the 2002–2007 era when the party enjoyed rather moderate power as a newly established Islamic party; and the post–2007 period when it has consolidated its position and emerged as an unrivaled party in electoral polls. In contrast, Albanian Islamic actors, including the AMC, are organized as civil society organizations and enjoy limited political prerogatives and organizational power. Hence, our organizational sources vary from weak (in Albania) to moderately powerful (AKP after 2002) and powerful (AKP after 2007).

In line with the most similar system research design, our cases show variation also in terms of support for democratic rules and EU enlargement criteria, which can be explained by variation in the main explanatory factor. Weak Albanian actors have shown absolute support for democracy and European integration, although they are politically restrained when it comes to adopting concrete legislative changes. Stronger Turkish actors show a more discrepant –selective, partial and stagnant pattern of compliance consistent with their relative strength. During its first term in office (2002–2007), in line with the need to stabilize its position and increase its legitimacy as a new Islamic-based party, AKP followed a fast-paced but selective compliance trend. It opted to pick and choose among the categories of the political criteria those measures promising to boost its power while ignoring others which jeopardized its position in the system. In contrast, the post–2007 period when the AKP had already consolidated its position as a ruling party, is marked by increased stagnation and even reversal of previous compliance. Moreover, the stronger AKP has become, the more it could afford to emphasize Islamist norms in the public arena.

### **Islamic Actors' Power Resources and Ideational Commitment**

#### *Secularist Borders and Constraints*

Secularism has long historical roots and is firmly established as the fundamental characteristic of the regime in both our cases. In Albania, concerns about national unity and state-led modernization reforms have molded a strong historical consensus on the separation of religion and the state since the creation of the independent state in 1912 (Della Rocca 1994; Clayer 2009a). Following the abrogation of all religious rights under communist rule (1944–1991), post-communist Albania has returned to the pre-communist

consensus, where the state is considered neutral in questions of faith and does not recognize any official religion, promoting instead religious equality and institutional independence (1998 Constitution, Article 10). The Turkish legal and political context is similarly secular. Since the foundation of the modern Turkish republic in 1923, Turkey has embarked on a process of secularization seen as the *sine qua non* of state-led Westernization/modernization reforms. First recognized in 1937, secularism is the regime's founding principle, whose revision "cannot even be proposed" (Article 4 of the 1982 Constitution). Furthermore, the Political Parties Law of 1983 outlaws exploitation of religion for political purposes (Hale and Ozbudun 2010: 17). Parties that engage in anti-secular activities can be dissolved by the Constitutional Court, as has formerly been the case with several Turkish Islamist parties.

In addition, since its inception, secularism in both Albania and Turkey has been inspired by an 'assertive' French model of *laïcité*, which implies active state control over religious activity. The Albanian state, much like the pre-communist state, has pledged to maintain cooperative relations with religious actors, while de facto overseeing religious affairs (Popovic 2006: 42; Lakshman-Lepain 2002: 41). The Committee of Cults, a state organ created in 1999, seeks to not only facilitate cooperation between the state and religious groups, but also to check and document their activity. In Turkey, state control over religion is mainly exercised through the Directorate General of Religious Affairs (DRA), an institution under the office of the Prime Minister, which coordinates religious services. The state has shown a bias for Sunni Islam through DRA policies, and is often criticized for ignoring the rights and concerns of Alevi Turkish citizens (about 15 percent of the population) (Akan 2010). In line with the assertive model, both countries have also shown a clear tendency to confine the role of religion to the private sphere, and prohibit the use of religious symbols in public institutions.

Islamic actors in both cases have generally conformed to the principles of secularism that are enshrined in the legal framework, but are also strongly embedded in the historical, social and political context. Much like the other religious organizations in the country, the AMC seems to share the view that secularism is not only a social necessity, but also a divinely sanctioned principle with a foundation in authentic national values (Endersen 2010: 205). One of the leaders of the community notes harshly in that, 'if the community [ ] hypothetically should depart from secularism [ ] it is because it has been hijacked by

politics and anti-Albanian schemers who represent false religion. One's true religion is fundamentally immune to politicization' (Ibid: 205). On the other hand, Turkish Islamic actors, -including the AKP - have been far more active than their Albanian counterparts in negotiating the contours of secularism enshrined in the constitution and actively enacted by the Kemalist establishment (the military, high judiciary and the opposition Republican People's Party, CHP). Against the official rigid Kemalist secularism, AKP has endorsed a more 'passive' form of secularism, which has been particularly evident in its efforts to broaden religious freedoms in the public sphere, especially via the removal of the Islamic headscarf ban in public institutions (Kuru 2006: 147-152). At the same time, AKP supports the official statist-Kemalist approach to state-religion relations, and has rejected any revisions to the DRA's powerful status (Kuru 2006: 143-144). On the whole, despite its looser stance on secularism at the level of individual religious freedoms, AKP has officially committed to the secular state model. In its own program, the party condemns 'the interpretation and distortion of secularism as enmity against religion' and rejects the use of religion 'for political, economic and other interests' (quoted in Kuru 2006: 142). Hence, AKP's program clearly prohibits the transformation of the state and society on the basis of Islamic law (Yavuz 2009: 1-13).

### *Organizational Capacities*

Islamic actors in both cases possess the opportunity to organize and mobilize their believers in different forms and capacities. In Albania, religious organizations operate within the realm of civil society and are regulated by the law on non-profit organizations. Yet, all traditional communities, including the AMC, have the right to sign bilateral agreements with the state that grants them some additional advantages over other religious organizations such as official recognition, representation in the Committee of Cults, as well as supplementary tax exemptions and financial support. Efforts to create an Albanian Islamic party, or any other form of political representation, however, have all failed because of the lack of support among Muslims themselves.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the Turkish political spectrum is marked by relatively autonomous Islamic political activism initially organized within right-wing parties (during the 1950s and 1960s) and subsequently channeled into separate Islamic/Islamist parties. The first openly Islamist party was established in 1970 (National Order Party, MNP), but was subsequently banned from politics

by the Constitutional Court based on anti-secular charges along with its successors National Salvation Party (MSP), Welfare Party (RP) and Virtue Party (FP).

Established in 2001, AKP is an off-shoot of the Welfare Party and its successor FP. Since its creation, AKP has emerged as the largest and most successful Islamic-inspired party. It has been in government since 2002 based on its remarkable share of the popular vote in the 2002 (34.29%) and 2007 elections (46.58%). The party owes its popularity and unprecedented electoral success largely to its mobilization strategies and organizational effectiveness. Its mobilization strategy targets a broad coalition combining 'former center-right voters, moderate Islamists, moderate nationalists and even a certain segment of the former center left' (Hale and Ozbudun 2010: 37). With more than three million members nation-wide, AKP uniquely approximates a real mass party on the Turkish political scene. Like the other Turkish parties, it has a highly centralized and hierarchical organization, with its leader and PM Recep Tayyip Erdogan controlling all party policies and functions. In addition, AKP's local organization structures seem 'more active, more highly motivated and more elaborately organized than those of other Turkish political parties' (Ibid. 49). Furthermore, the party's organic links with the extremely well-organized Islamist Gulen movement ensured it nation-wide support among related business organizations, financial institutions, universities, schools, key media outlets and, especially, state bureaucracy (particularly, the police force and the Ministry of Education) (Krespin 2009, Yavuz 2009: 250-252). Hence, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that it is extremely difficult for all other parties to rival the AKP at the polls.

The AMC was created in 1991 soon after the lifting of the communist ban on religion in 1990. It enjoys the status of a nation-wide organization responsible for managing and interpreting all Islamic-related issues in the country (Lakshman-Lepain 2002: 4). Favorable state policies as well as transnational linkages and assistance from religious organizations abroad have allowed the AMC to rebuild basic religious structures and offer religious services to its followers. In addition, the community has largely expanded its social activities including assistance to the poor, medical services and youth programs along with running several madrasas and professional schools with an Islamic background (Jazexhiu 2010). Still, the regeneration of religious organization after decades of atheist policies proved slow and difficult (Pano 2003: 152). On the one hand, the substantial mass of agnostics, especially among the younger generations who have grown up amidst

communist anti-religious propaganda, has substantially weakened religious organizations' social basis and mobilization capacity (Clayer 2003). On the other, AMC's capacity to manage Islamic affairs is undermined by the lack of independent sources, including its own budget, which is instead pooled together by different sources as they arise. Most AMC staff consists of laymen who have professional jobs outside the community; several mosques are run by foreign organizations outside the Community's control, and most social activities also depend on a large number of foreign organizations and external financial resources (Raxhimi 2010; Jazexhiu 2010).

### *Liberal Islamic Ideas*

In both Albania and Turkey, the interpretation of Islamic doctrine is historically embedded in the tradition of liberal Islam. In Albania, the creation of a localized and liberal tradition of Islam goes back to the pre-communist period when the modernizing state policies forced Islamic authorities to adapt to 'principles of present European life' (Clayer 2009a: 406-423; Popovic 2006: 42). The development of a liberal tradition of Islam in Turkey can also be traced back to the westernization reforms conducted during the early years of the modern Turkish republic (i.e., adoption of secular civil and dress codes as well as a secular education system), which sought to modernize the society and remove religion from the political sphere. That the AKP disavowed the Islamist state model advocated by the previously banned Islamist parties confirms the dominant tendency for a more liberal, progressive version of Islam in Turkish politics. Hence, in both Albania and Turkey, the historically achieved consensus on secularism has gradually led to the rejection of radical and unrestrained interpretations of Islamic law. In both cases, Islamic actors have generally incorporated moderation, tolerance and compatibility with liberal democratic principles into their official Islamic doctrine.

In the case of Albania, Islamic actors emerged from the communist era apparently deprived of any ideological aspirations, hence, in need of a redefinition of their social and political doctrine. The choice was clearly for moderate Islam that built on the pre-war traditions and borrowed selectively from imported versions diffused via foreign organizations, missionaries and Albanian students studying theology abroad (Elbasani 2010). Gradually, Turkish influences have gained favor against more radicalized models which arrived with Arab and Middle Eastern NGOs. As Raxhimi puts it, 'Turkish Islam is regarded as culturally

more in step with Albania's Muslims and less vulnerable to radicalized religious interpretation.[] None except one of the current 30 members of the AMC administration have studied in Arab countries, a reversed ratio compared to ten years ago' (Raxhimi 2010: 4). The Hanefi School, a moderate version of Islam, has become the official line of the AMC which has called upon its believers to resist possible 'Arabization of Albanian Islam'. In its bilateral agreement with the community, the state itself has pledged to defend the moderate line against '[any] deformations, extremist tendencies, or other aggressive manifestations in the spaces occupied by (Islamic) believers' (article 3). In general, both the old and new Albanian Islam are depicted as non-ritualistic, disassociated from theological problems, tolerant, and pro-Western (Lakshman-Lepain 2002: 49).

In the Turkish case, AKP has clearly distanced itself from the ideology of political Islam shared by its Islamist predecessor parties as well as the relatively marginal Felicity Party (SP) and the Islamist 'National Outlook Movement', which advocated the Islamic state model (Kuru 2005: 268-273). Officially, AKP subscribes to the ideal of 'conservative democracy' that approximates the program of the mainstream Turkish right and Europe's Christian democrats. As explained by the party's ideologue, Yalcin Akdogan, conservative democracy stresses 'common sense, prudence, and gradual change, unlike its two alternatives – socialism and liberalism – that promote ideological rationalism and radical changes' (Kuru 2006: 141-142). In the words of President Abdullah Gul, a former, prominent AKP politician: 'We were to prove that a Muslim society is capable of changing and renovating itself, attaining contemporary standards [of democracy], while preserving its values, traditions and identity' (Duran 2006: 288). Despite its determination to define itself in conservative democracy terms, AKP can still be categorized as an Islamic-rooted party given its religious roots and sympathy for Islamic values. Although the party's Islamic credentials are difficult to discern, some of its policy initiatives such as efforts to criminalize adultery, have arguably revealed its 'deep convictions about Islamic patriarchal values' (Yavuz 2009: 168). Such initiatives have additionally been surrounded by AKP members' statements expressing sympathy for Islamic values. In May 2004 for example, Erdogan admitted that 'it would be wrong to juxtapose the definitions of Islam and secularism. People cannot be secular'.<sup>ii</sup> Hence, conservative democracy is an ideology which promotes religious values at the level of individual freedoms, without seeking anti-secular transformation of the state. On the whole, AKP then aspires to a reform-oriented, liberal conception of Islam, while not completely abandoning Islamic political values.



## **Differentiated Support for Democracy and EU integration**

Albanian and Turkish Islamic actors have generally adopted a pro-democratic and pro-EU position marked by support for political reforms associated with EU membership. In both cases the EU emerged as a window of opportunity for Islamic actors struggling to consolidate their position in a fierce secular environment. Islamic actors have, however, endorsed democracy and EU integration when and as much as this proved beneficial for their position in the respective social and political context, either in terms of boosting their political power or lending credibility to their ideas and programs in an environment suspicious to politicization of Islam.

### *Fierce Secularism, Weak Actors and Liberal Theology: Wholesale Commitment to the EU*

In the last two decades since the fall of communism, Albanian Islamic actors have perceived democracy and EU democratic criteria as the best 'shield' against past repression as well as a survival strategy in the dominant anti-Islamic atmosphere that has characterized post-communist transition. Endorsement of democracy and European integration, widely accepted as the final goal of transition, could only boost Albanian Muslims' frail position and contested Islamic values in the wider socio-political context. The embrace of a liberal form of Islam made democracy and Europe their ideational ally and a winning strategy vis-à-vis political and social opponents.

Since the very beginning of democratic revolts in the early 1990s, Islamic actors have supported democracy as a system that best guarantees religious rights. At the beginning of transition, Islamic groups quickly reorganized after decades of communist destruction, and emerged as weak but supportive allies of democratic forces advocating the expansion of human and religious rights (Elbasani 2010). Even when newly won freedoms enabled them to gain some autonomy and organize their respective believers, Islamic organizations have preferred to maintain a low political profile alongside unwavering support for democracy (Enderson 2010).

Albanian Islamic actors have also fully supported the parallel process of European integration, which since the fall of communism has emerged as 'the only game in town', commanding the consensus of all the political spectrum, attention of all governing

majorities, and absolute public support across all class, political and religious cleavages in society (Elbasani 2004). Islamic actors' support for Europe partly derives from EU membership conditions' close association with the democratization project which altogether ensures preservation of their newly won rights and institutional autonomy. At the same time, a pro-Europe orientation also promises to legitimize Islam against the prevailing domestic discourse that portrays it not only as an alien and controversial faith in Europe, but also an obstacle to the country's European future. Mainstream cultural, political and sometimes official state debates in Albania share a common thread of hostility towards Islam (Sulstarova 2006b: 265; Puto 2006: 27). The most celebrated Albanian novelist and undisputed cultural authority, Ismail Kadare, speaks on behalf of many intellectuals when he asserts that 'the Albanian path to Europe should be taken without the baggage of Islam, which is not worth it and only delays the arrival' (quoted in Sulstarova 2006a). Much too often, official debates have replicated the offensive mood towards Islam. Alfred Moisiu, then president of the country, enraged many Muslim believers when explaining in front of an academic audience that 'Albanians are often cited as ... a country of Muslim majority. [But] this is a very superficial reading of the reality. Islam in Albania is neither a residential religion, nor a faith spread originally.... As a rule, it is a shallow religion' (2005). Similarly, the director of the State Committee of Cults, Ilir Kulla, went so far as violating the constitutionally recognized principles of state neutrality and religious autonomy when arguing that 'the state should take over control of Islam and not treat it as the other religions' (quoted in MFA 2008a).

Altogether, the European project and controversies on the role of Islam have weakened the position of Islam as a system of beliefs and organization of the majority. As Clayer puts it, 'Post-communist politics have signified the end of the pre-communist monopoly of Islamic institutions and an inversion of the status of Islamic community into a "surviving majority"' (2003: 13). Young graduates, studying theology in foreign madrasas, have mobilized to reorganize and strengthen Islam vis-à-vis other forces in society. Established to fight against Islamophobia, a new association, the Muslim Forum of Albania (MFA), has raised its voice against common Islamophobia in the daily press (MFA 2008b; MFA 2009) as well as state bias against Islamic practices and organizations (Sinani 2005; MFA 2009) and the inaccuracies of depicting Islam as a religion that contradicts European values (MFA 2008a). Regardless of these efforts to defend Islam, all Islamic groups have embraced full and absolute commitment to EU integration and related democratic criteria as the most

suitable strategy of 'survival'. The national central organization, AMC, has taken the lead to package 'a European version of Islam' which stresses the liberal, tolerant and Albanian peculiar tradition (Vickers 2008; Sinani 2010). Ideas of 'European Islam' build on its historically liberal tradition, but are especially geared to show its compatibility with European values. Indeed, one of the leaders of the Islamic community seemed to articulate this synergic relation when noting that, 'the EU conditions for membership are in concord with Islamic values, such as the fight against corruption, trafficking, prostitution, feuds, drugs, etc.' (Endresen 2010: 179). In general, all Islamic actors, including those advocating a stricter interpretation of Islamic doctrine, have stressed that:

Although Muslims of Albania pray to their Lord in Arabic and face Him towards Mecca, they remain loyal and devoted citizens to the principles of democracy and human rights in which our United Europe believes today. The Muslims of Albania have a great need for the democracy and the human rights that our common continent has constructed in years (MFA 2008b: 5).

Altogether, both young and old Muslims, moderate and conservative fractions, official and smaller organizations have joined to defend Islam by associating it with European democratic values.

#### *Fierce Secularism, Strong Actors and Mixed Theology: Selective Support for democracy*

From the outset, Islamic-rooted AKP emerged in a secular environment hostile to the expression of religion in the political sphere. It thus needed the empowerment that comes with democratization and related EU criteria and fast emerged as a pro-EU force and 'champion' of EU compliance when compared to the previous governments. At the same time, however, owing to its strong organizational basis and powerful position as a governing party, it could afford to resist some EU demands and engage in selective, partial and slow forms of compliance. The close association between AKP's power-related calculations and resulting compliance is particularly evident in the changing patterns of support according to its power position at different time periods.

*Pre-2007 Period: Fragile Political Position, Rising but Selective Compliance*

Immediately upon assuming power in 2002, AKP capitalized on the goal of EU membership, which was declared as the party's top foreign policy objective. Similar to the Albanian case, AKP had strong political incentives for embracing a pro-EU reform agenda and saw EU enlargement as an excellent window of opportunity for the consolidation of its position in the Turkish political arena. As a relatively new and Islamic-rooted party, AKP needed to strengthen safeguards vis-à-vis the secular military-judicial establishment which scrutinized its secular credentials from the start. As Hale and Ozbudun put it, AKP needed 'the protection of democratic rights and liberties' more than any other political group in Turkey (2010: 10). This imperative to 'survive' in the Turkish secular context has increasingly pushed the party to enact liberalizing EU reforms, especially those measures that promised to make the official Kemalist-secular ideology 'less repressive and more inclusive' (Duran 2006: 284). A pro-EU stance promised to additionally grant the AKP much needed political support in the domestic political sphere. Indeed, when the party first came to power, '[it] was still in a legitimacy crisis' with Erdogan being banned from politics<sup>iii</sup> and the secular establishment accusing the AKP of hiding an 'Islamist agenda' (Kuru 2005: 272). The EU anchor was thus crucial for lending credibility to AKP's program as well as demonstrating the compatibility between the party's 'conservative democracy' ideology and European democratic values.

Hence, the AKP successfully managed Turkey's EU accession process by adopting six major legislative reform packages as well as several related constitutional amendments, which led to the opening of membership negotiations with the EU in October 2005.<sup>iv</sup> Newly adopted legislation, however, was often geared to empower the AKP in its power struggle with secular forces. For example, legislation targeting 'civilianization of politics' and 'fundamental political freedoms' bolstered AKP's autonomy from secular pressures while weakening the secular establishment. In particular, changes in the structure and role of the National Security Council, a formerly influential institution enabling the military's involvement in politics, marginalized the importance of the Turkish military as a political actor and a fierce defender of secularism. Additional legislation making barring parties on anti-secular and other charges much more difficult worked to strengthen AKP's position against the Constitutional Court, which has previously banned Islamist parties.<sup>v</sup> Furthermore, amended legislation aiming to liberalize the political environment promised

to prevent situations like Erdogan's former imprisonment for expression of opinion. The constitutional amendments that were adopted in December 2002 and translated into relevant legislative changes in January 2003, restricted the ban on party membership to persons 'convicted for terrorist acts'. These changes enabled the previously indicted AKP leader to run for elections and assume prime ministry in March 2003.

Not all the EU's political conditions, however, were translated into comprehensive legislative changes. Most reform demands that threatened to trim down AKP's power position as a ruling party were either ignored or resisted. For example, most EU requirements targeting political accountability such as improvement of judicial independence and intra-party democracy as well as removal of MPs' immunity were systematically overlooked despite the Commission's repeated insistence on these topics in its progress reports.

#### *Post-2007 Period: Strong Political Position, Weaker and Selective Compliance*

After the 2007 elections, the AKP, which ensured widespread electoral support, emerged as an unrivaled and stronger political party in the Turkish scene. The post-2007 period is marked by the party's weaker compliance record, and even competition and divergence between its norms and the EU's reform demands. Given its expanded power base, AKP could afford to approach EU conditions with an increased leeway and pursue its independent political preferences. This was also helped by the fact that the party had already picked and legislated the EU measures that promised to weaken the secular players while consolidating its own position in the system.

Various studies have already noted that following its massive victory at the July 2007 elections, AKP started to rule 'with an exaggerated sense of its own power' (Onis 2010: 9). This power shift partly revealed itself in the reversal of certain reforms subsumed under EU democratic conditionality, particularly regarding fundamental political freedoms. Freedoms of expression and the press came under increased attack as the media raised public criticism against the policies of the AKP government. As of May 2011, Turkey held the record for the number of imprisoned journalists - in most cases due only to rigorous reporting and democratic criticism of the government (Finkel 2011). Meanwhile, the number of defamation suits launched by AKP leaders has risen remarkably (Champion

2011). The government's intolerance for criticism was noted by the Commission, which warned that anti-democratic pressures may result in self-censorship among the media outlets (European Commission 2010: 21). More recently, EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fulle voiced the EU's concerns over the arrests of prominent Turkish journalists and the confiscation of a not-yet-published book documenting the infiltration of the Turkish police force by the members of the Islamist Gulen movement (Ergin 2011).

Concerns over human rights, tolerance for democratic criticism, and a free and fair judicial process were also raised in the context of the so-called 'Ergenekon' and 'Balyoz' investigations, which led to the imprisonment of prominent AKP critics in the military and media, based upon questionable conspiracy charges that they would attempt to overthrow the government (Dogan and Rodrik 2010). Such instances of rising illiberalism seem to have cost the AKP the support of the liberal intelligentsia, which had initially welcomed its liberalizing and pro-EU reforms (Beaumont 2011). Some observers even referred to AKP's regime as 'civilian autocracy' in-the-making (Mert 2010), while cautioning that its re-election at the June 2011 elections could risk the establishment of autocratic rule (The Economist 2011).

The shift towards increasing illiberalism was paralleled by occasional policy initiatives that brought Islamic overtones underlying AKP's ideology to the fore. The party started its second term with a strong campaign against the ban on the Islamic headscarf in state institutions and public universities, which has been traditionally upheld as the fundamental symbol of Turkish secularism. In August 2008, the party barely escaped closure by the Constitutional Court, which nonetheless ruled that AKP has become 'a focal point for anti-secular activities' and cut its state funds as a sanction. Such formal policy initiatives were arguably followed by more 'informal' Islamization attempts at the grass-roots level, for example via banning alcoholic beverages in restaurants as well as pressures to attend mosque prayers and fast during Ramadan - in exchange for jobs and other favors in institutions and local municipalities controlled by the AKP (Toprak *et al.* 2008). These pressures have also occurred in the form of 'neighborhood pressure' whereby the Islamist/conservative lifestyle is imposed not necessarily by the government but the citizens themselves (Turkone 2007). Yet, the AKP government has been at least complicit in Islamization attempts, if not directly driving Islamization at the societal level. In May 2011, a marriage counselor at an AKP-controlled municipal unit in Istanbul admitted to having

advised couples that men should take up to four wives in line with Islamic law (Haberturk 2011). The fact that she kept her position following her public admission can be interpreted as a sign that the government condones, if not openly supports, such Islamist views.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has investigated the question of when and how Islamic political actors support democracy, and in particular, the EU's democratic criteria subsumed under membership conditionality. We focused on Islamic organizations in two Muslim-majority, EU applicant states, Turkey and Albania. In both cases, organized actors endorsed democratic rules based on a rationalist logic that combines interest-driven and ideational dynamics. Both Turkey's AKP and Albanian Islamic civil society organizations formulated their political preferences regarding democracy and related EU conditions on the basis of their rational power needs shaped in their respective domestic political context.

Empirically speaking, our findings build upon three specific 'cases' that show variation along the independent variable of power needs: the weak Albanian actors, the moderately strong AKP (2002-2007) and even stronger post-2007 AKP. Consistent with their greater power needs, Albanian actors were found to show unwavering support for democracy throughout the period of analysis while AKP's stance towards democratic and EU issues was stronger in the pre-2007 period than in the post-2007 era.

These findings highlight the importance of the relationship between power considerations defined in the domestic political context and Islamic actors' support for democratic processes. Our analysis is a bit inconclusive, however, on the role of theology in influencing Islamic actors' democratic stance. A truly liberal theology - along with power needs, as in the case of Albanian Islam and to a certain extent AKP in the period 2002-2007- surely enhances actors' endorsement of democracy and compliance with EU criteria, but the relationship between illiberal ideology and deviation from democracy is not so certain. We do not know, for instance, whether or how much the post-2007 shift in Turkey's EU compliance was induced by a parallel shift in AKP's theology towards illiberalism. Our evidence rather shows that the shift is primarily explained by AKP's reduced power dependence on the domestic adoption of democratic criteria. Hence, future

research should highlight the role played by ideology in Islamic actors' changing attitudes towards democracy.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Phone interview with Besnik Sinani, December 8, 2010, Berlin.

<sup>ii</sup> For this and similar statements, see the formal indictment of the Office of the Chief Republican Prosecutor in the case against the AKP, available at: <http://arsiv.ntvmsnbc.com/news/439364.asp> (accessed on 11.02.2011).

<sup>iii</sup> Erdogan served a four-month prison sentence in 1999 for reading an Islamist poem at a public rally in 1997, which led to his conviction for 'inciting the public to hatred' based upon religion. He was subsequently banned from participating in parliamentary elections for five years.

<sup>iv</sup> For a detailed discussion on AKP's reforms under conditionality, see Hale and Ozbudun (2010: 55-67).

<sup>v</sup> These and other legislative measures regarding civilianization of politics enacted the October 2001 constitutional amendments adopted by the previous government.

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