# Arguing Democracy on Religious Grounds: Lessons from the Catholic Experience

Güneş Murat Tezcür

## Democracy, Culture and Catholicism International Research Project (DCCIRP)

## Research Project Description

I am proposing a research project that compares how religious arguments in favor of competitive and pluralistic politics affect the dynamics of democratization in predominantly Catholic and Muslim societies. The proposal primarily addresses two interrelated questions: 1) when and why do religious political actors (i.e., clergy, political parties, and religious NGOs and social movements) become advocates of democratic governance; 2) how do they articulate and justify their new pro-democratic positions? To answer these questions, the proposal focuses on the role of religious political actors during democratization in predominantly Catholic countries of South Europe, Latin America, and Eastern Europe between 1974 and 1990, which is called "Catholic Wave," (Philpott 2004), with a particular focus on Peru and Lithuania, and in contemporary Indonesia and Turkey. The processes that led religious political actors to adopt pro-democracy positions in Catholic countries have important implications for understanding the prospects for *sustainable* democratization in Indonesia and Turkey. In this regard, my proposal directly speaks to the themes of the "Democracy, Culture and Catholicism International Research Project." I am particularly interested in understanding of how Church, Jesuit institutions, and Catholic believers respond to and engage with the empowerment of indigenous movements in Peru, decline of religiosity in Lithuania, and proliferation of Muslim political actors in nascent Indonesian democracy? I will delineate how Catholic and Muslim thinkers *justify* liberal-democracy on religious grounds and how they develop their own unique understanding of

modernism and pluralism? The international research project will provide a unique setting for me to pursue answers to these questions. My proposal, which adopts a comparative-historical approach (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer 2003) and systematically studies Catholic and Islamic perspectives on democracy, will result in a scholarly manuscript that will be part of the volume sponsored by the project.

In the early 20th century, many observers thought that some inherent characteristics of Catholicism made it incompatible with democracy. Catholic majority countries in Europe and Latin America were ruled by either unstable and highly unequal parliamentary regimes or dictatorships. Yet, the developments in the second half of the century demonstrated that these assessments were deeply flawed. The rise of the Christian Democracy political parties in countries such as Austria, Belgium, Germany and Italy ensured that there was no inherent contradiction between popular Catholic beliefs and support for liberal-democratic order. These parties were highly instrumental in incorporating Catholic masses into pluralistic and competitive politics, and in contributing to the stability of democracy during the high times of the Cold War (Almond 1948; Kalyvas 1996; 1998). Prominent Catholic thinkers such as Jacques Maritain and John Courtney Murray were pivotal in the Church's endorsement of liberal democracy (Philpott 2004). The wave of democratization in Catholic periphery (i.e. Latin America) followed the Second Vatican Council's endorsement of religious freedom in 1965 (Huntington 1991; Wilde 2007). Furthermore, the Catholic Church in Central and South America pursued membership strategies that actively addressed the needs of the rural and urban poor in the face of growing competition from Protestantism. In turn, these strategies undermined the ruling military dictatorship's goal of suppressing subversive organizations in countries like

Brazil and El Salvador (Gill 1994). In some Latin American countries, Christian Democrats became key political actors (Mainwaring 2003). The moral support given and protection afforded by John Paul II to the opposition led by Lech Walesa's Solidarity movement was a crucial factor that brought the fall of the communist regime in Poland (Weigel 1992; Zubrzycki 2006). The Catholic Church also played a decisive role in the non-violent overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship in Philippines in 1986 (Youngblood 1990). These developments challenged the notion that secularization understood as decline and privatization of religion is a precondition for the establishment of liberal-democracy in an age that has increasingly been characterized by a secular spirit (Taylor 2007). A religion that fosters public arguments against arbitrary state power and in favor of human rights plays a positive role in democratic transitions (Casanova 1994).

Arguments espousing the incompatibility of Islam with democratic rule have been frequent in the early 21st century (i.e., Fish 2002). Many Muslim countries are currently ruled by authoritarian regimes, especially the ones located in the Arab Middle East (Stepan & Robertson 2003). Yet democracy has made significant progress in Muslim majority countries (Hefner 2004; Tezcür 2010). Indonesia and Turkey are arguably the most promising cases of democratic consolidation in the broader Muslim world. These two ethnically and religiously diverse countries have institutionalized free electoral competition and are in the process of democratic consolidation. Public sphere in both countries provide access to powerful religious political actors with mass mobilizing capacity including political parties, social movements, and NGOs. Some of these actors engage with liberal-democratic ideas and compete for influence with potent secular forces and more Islamic radicals. At the same time, democratization process in Indonesia and Turkey are beset with ethnic and sectarian conflict, lack of rule of law, weak civilian control over the military and widespread corruption. Furthermore, public expressions of Islam, which are

very sensitive to restrictions on freedom *of* Muslim practices, but often fail to defend freedom *from* orthodox Islam, may increase societal tensions and contribute to political polarization.

How does the Catholic experience of democratization enrich the scholarly understanding of the problems of political change in contemporary Indonesia and Turkey? In particular, does the absence of a centralized hierarchical structure in Islam adversely or positively affect the prospects for democratization? After all, the Catholic Church's espousal of pro-democracy position by the 1960s was a critical historical development that enabled democratization in Catholic majority countries. Islam lacks a similar dominant entity. Can autonomous Muslim activists and thinkers become agents of democratic change similar to the Catholic Church? Diffusion of ideas, people, and commodities, and rapid advances in technology in contemporary times, dubbed by "a secular age" by Charles Taylor (2007), makes pluralism an inevitable aspect of religious experience. How do Catholic actors, including Jesuit institutions, respond to challenges and opportunities that come with the establishment of a liberal-democratic order and societal pluralism? How do Catholic and Muslim responses converge and differ in these respects?

I have a solid publication record and have a very good understanding of political dynamics in Indonesia and Turkey with field experience in both countries. Additionally, I have been working on this research proposal since fall 2009. Currently, I immerse myself with the substantial literature on the Catholic wave of democratization. I engage with the key Church documents on liberal-democracy and the writings of key Catholic thinkers including Maritain and Murray. I systematically compare their arguments with the positions of Muslim political actors and intellectuals in Indonesia and Turkey.

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