To Western eyes, Middle East politics have again been stood on their head. Iran’s theocratic mullahs allowed the election of Hassan Rowhani, a man who announced in his first speech as President-elect that his victory is “the victory of wisdom, moderation, and awareness over fanaticism and bad behavior.”

Iranians, apparently surprised that the candidate whom a majority of them had backed (over six harder-line candidates) had won, poured into the streets and hailed a victory “for the people.” To be sure, it was a carefully controlled election: all candidates who might actually have challenged Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s authority were disqualified in advance. But, within those limits, the government allowed the people’s votes to be counted.

Next door, in Turkey, the West’s favorite Islamic democrat, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was using bulldozers, tear gas, water cannon, and rubber bullets to clear central Istanbul’s Taksim Square and Gezi Park of peaceful protesters who would not bend to his will. Erdoğan’s theory of government seems to be that, because he was elected by a majority of Turks who still support him, anyone who opposes him is a terrorist or a pawn of sinister foreign forces. He appears to see no room for legitimate opposition, for the idea that today’s majority can be tomorrow’s minority and that the rules of the game must allow both to be heard.

Four years ago, when hundreds of thousands of young Iranians flooded the streets of Tehran to protest outgoing President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s reelection, the Iranian government shot at them with live rounds. The protests were brutally repressed, with participants rounded up, imprisoned, and reportedly raped and tortured, damaging the regime’s standing not only among Iranians, but also among the millions of young Arabs across the Middle East and North Africa who would soon rise up to demand their social and political rights.

Erdoğan was initially a hero to those same crowds. He toured Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya in September 2011 and received a hero’s welcome. He presented his Justice and Development Party as the Muslim equivalent of Europe’s Christian Democratic parties, combining economic growth, anti-corruption policies, and free elections.

Today, Erdoğan’s government looks much more like the governments against which young Arabs rose, targeting journalists and accusing a “high-interest-rate lobby” of speculators of seeking to harm the Turkish economy. He has also taken a page from Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s book, not only demonizing the demonstrators, but also going after the medical personnel who care for them and the hoteliers who shelter them.

Turkey is certainly not Iran, and vice versa. But comparing current developments in the two countries yields lessons that resonate across the Middle East and North Africa. Most important, in a world that at least pays lip service to democracy, the voice of “the people” matters. It confers
a kind of legitimacy that simply cannot be acquired by force and that is ultimately the surest guarantee of investment and growth.

Of course, “the people” are never truly one: fickle in their loyalties and subject to demagoguery, they often unite in opposition but fracture once in command. Nonetheless, the willingness of large numbers of people to stand up (or sit in) for their right to be heard, despite the imminent possibility of violent repression, announces to their fellow citizens and the world that something has gone very wrong.

Khamenei and his fellow guardians of Iran’s Islamic revolution were able to weather the 2009 storm, but their façade of legitimate power was collapsing. Somewhat paradoxically, the election of Rowhani will strengthen their political hand. And, though Erdoğan may well be able to force the protest genie back into the bottle, he will be significantly weakened until the next Turkish election.

A second lesson of recent events in Iran and Turkey is that the spectrum of government in the Middle East and North Africa runs from autocracy and theocracy to varieties of managed democracy. No country qualifies as a full liberal democracy – that is, as a political system that combines free and fair elections with constitutional protections of individual rights for all its citizens.

Iran has long qualified as what the American foreign-policy analyst Fareed Zakaria has called an “illiberal democracy.” Turkey, for its part, seemed to be on a path toward true liberal democracy, notwithstanding the criticism of those who pointed to Erdoğan’s jailing of journalists and generals; it is now backsliding for all the world to see.

A final lesson is that the test of a secure government is whether it can bear to hear itself criticized, even excoriated. Erdoğan seems outraged, above all, by Turkish citizens’ temerity to speak up against him.

After Erdoğan appeared to broker a deal with the protesters regarding the fate of Gezi Park, the planned demolition of which sparked the initial demonstrations, one of my Twitter followers expressed his satisfaction at the outcome and said the demonstrators should now go home, because “three weeks is enough.” But enough for what?

Recall that the Occupy Wall Street protesters in 2011 took over lower Manhattan for two full months. New York City officials ultimately did shut down the protest, but largely for health and sanitary reasons and related complaints by neighborhood residents. At a press conference on the day the protests began, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg said: “People have a right to protest, and if they want to protest, we’ll be happy to make sure they have locations to do it.”

Meanwhile, in Syria, “the people” rose up, were fired upon, took up arms, were manipulated, and began a cycle of sectarian killing and revenge that can only fracture them further. Neither Iran nor Turkey has reached that point. Nonetheless, peaceful protest, lawsuits, political negotiation, compromise, and ultimately fresh elections would provide both countries – and many others in
the region and beyond – a far better way to resolve their internal tensions than the approaches their leaders currently employ.