

TODAY'S ZAMAN

Secularist paranoia raises tension across Turkey

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May 9, 2007

The AK Party, in its move to assume a new political identity, has connected itself with international agendas such as globalization and human rights. The party has already developed the strength to be able to defend its own legitimacy within Turkey, and now it seeks to forge alliances internationally that would gain it respect on the world stage. As a result the AK Party's secular opposition parties risk being seen as campaigning against democracy and human rights.

In a practical sense, the aims of the AK Party and the EU overlap one another, a tremendous opportunity for the party in Turkey at this critical time. The suspicions about the possibility of a secret agenda within the party are tempered by alliance with such global platforms. Foremost among these issues are plans for reducing the role that the military plays in politics; reforming the extremely Kemalist justice system; widening freedom of expression for everyone -- including liberals, futurists and Islamicists; and strengthening the middle class. Opposition to these plans from opposing parties seems ludicrous.

The fear that this political transformation has been merely a tactical maneuver still exists in the minds of many doubtful secularists. They are afraid that the AK Party, which speaks so positively about human rights, will, in practice, choose to champion only the rights of their own conservative and devout Muslim supporters. This worry is a legitimate one; the AK Party has been around for only a short while, not long enough to prove its seriousness and sincere intentions on these fronts. While doubt lingers, the only way for the AK Party to assert its integrity on the matter is through its continued support for the European project and other connected values.

In reality, the formation of the AK Party was the result of more than just a desire to present previously held politics in a new way. The emergence of a new class of astute Anatolian enterprisers was an important catalyst, most analysts agree. Following the liberalization of the Turkish economy in the 1980s, a silent revolution occurred, fostering development in the new city centers of Middle and East Anatolia. This significant economic development deserves to be looked at in detail, a task which unfortunately extends beyond the scope of this particular article. During the 1980s, the Turkish economy was almost entirely guided by Istanbul enterprises, which were tied strongly to the state and its Kemalist ideology. With the introduction of Turgut Özal's liberalizing policies, new possibilities were opened to and acted upon by a young generation of well-educated Anatolians. These new regional entrepreneurs moved quickly, gaining surprising levels of success both domestically

and internationally. A mixture of small and medium-sized business endeavors, the majority shared Islamic values and deep rooted ties with the more provincial factions in the country. By way of modern production and sales methods, these new businessmen managed to succeed in accessing the global market for their products -furniture in particular. The European Stability Initiative (ESI), a "think tank" foundation, described the eye-catching rise of the middle Anatolian entrepreneur as the emergence of the "Islamic Calvinists." This label, as the ESI used it, was a nod to the combination of Islamic values with labor ethics that resembled Calvinism. This spirit of Calvinism, according to famous sociologist Max Weber, was what opened the way to the rapid rise of capitalism in northwestern Europe during the 19th century. There is much that would oppose such a comparison of course, but first we need to look at how the sudden emergence of an Islamic capitalist class is perceived.

These new actors in the Turkish economy view economic interference by the state as the biggest motivation behind the consolidation of economic and political strength in Istanbul, the constantly reoccurring lulls in the nation's economy, and the unequal distribution of prosperity across the nation. In addition, this faction is strongly opposed to the tendency of the Istanbul elite to point to Central and East Anatolia as somehow "behind" due to its also being Turkey's strongest Islamicist faction. They see themselves not as behind or backward, but as new contributors to the political system and economy by means of strong, developed organizations. This being the case, it should not be surprising that a new political party which shows respect for traditional Islamic views would be formed including the support of the "Anatolian tigers" and their liberal economic policies.

Just a year after its formation, the AK Party attained a surprising victory in the November 2002 parliamentary elections. Taking 34 percent of the vote, the AK Party became the highest represented party in the new parliament. The only other party to rise above the 10 percent threshold was Deniz Baykal's CHP. None of the other parties, including the three government parties, had such success. What this meant was that the AK Party had control over two-thirds of the seats in the Turkish Parliament. Furthermore, the results symbolized a rejection of the coalition administration blamed for the 2001 economic crisis, and reflected the strong feeling among the public linking the coalition's policies to corruption. Thus, the AK Party victory meant rewarding a party and its leader who promised an end to this corruption and poverty. Or should we wonder whether the ruling position of this party was in fact an indication

of what many secularists fear: the Islamicization of the state and the society?

Europe disappoints Erdoğan

Even a year before the November 2007 elections, it was depressing to look at the balance sheet for the first AK Party administration. When considered in terms of Turkey's preparations for EU membership, everyone agrees that the AK Party displayed an enthusiasm which none of the secular administrations had shown previously. In terms of its EU membership quest, Turkey, at least on paper, entered into fast reforms to transform the nation into a more democratic country. It does appear now, though, that actually implementing all of these new laws will be a bit more difficult. Observers of the Turkish government both inside and outside of Turkey agree that in the last year and a half, there has actually been very little ground covered in critical areas such as the widening of freedom of expression, or guaranteeing the rights of ethnic and religious minorities.

The slowing tempo of progress in these areas is a situation that any struggling administration could face. But this slowed pace seems to be a reluctance that displays a real connection to the rising voice of Turkish nationalism, one which expresses in an ever louder voice its opposition to European requests from Turkey - deemed to be either one-sided or impossible. This opposition is voiced in the streets and in the parliament. As tensions grow within Europe over the expansion of the EU, more and more Turks are beginning to think their country will never become an EU member. With this sentiment prevailing, the desire to meet European demands, which appear to be more strict and strident with each passing year, seems to weaken.

As it heads toward the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections, the AK Party appears to have been unable to insulate itself from this growing societal pessimism on the subject of Europe. No matter how often government ministers like Gül and chief EU negotiator Ali Babacan point to the imperative nature of these reforms, Erdoğan himself appears to be less enthusiastic on this matter. As suggested by the title of the column, the growing tension between the secularists and the AK Party only adds to the problem. Within the framework of this article, it is important to express the meaning of the AK Party's authority in parliament, and how this reflects in the repeated and increasingly strong arguments regarding limitations set down by the secular state, such as the forbidding of headscarves in Turkish universities.

According to public polls, the large majority of the Turkish population is not against the wearing of headscarves in public buildings. A political party which would like to soften the bans against headscarves has been in power in Ankara now for four years. The near future does not, however, appear to hold any prospect of liberalization on this matter. The careful efforts by the government to start solving this problem were interrupted from the very beginning by the opposition's rejection of calls by the ruling administration to work together to soften the headscarf ban, and by the resistance of the military and a large part of the Turkish media. When in May 2006 a judge was killed most likely as a result of a decision he had made against a headscarved student's case, the emotions on this matter rose to even greater heights across Turkey. This murder spawned a giant

march in Ankara in support of secularity, and many people were reminded of the atmosphere of spring 1997 by the tension in the air. Since that time then, there have been no calm or reasonable debates in Turkey over the headscarf.

As a result, the administration tied at least some of its hopes for change on this matter to the EU, and in particular the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The Strasbourg court did in fact issue a ruling in regards to the ban on headscarves in Turkey in November 2005, but it was a ruling that, contrary to bringing any resolution or shedding any light, only managed to perpetuate the discontent. According to some observers, the resolution of this particular case was the cause for a serious and definitive decrease in Erdoğan's enthusiasm for what the EU could actually do for Turkish society. If solving this headscarf problem, which for many Muslims in Turkey was an extremely sensitive issue, was not going to be possible through reforms being carried out on the EU agenda, it meant Erdoğan had to confront very serious disappointment.

The Strasbourg court also issued a ruling which backed a precedent issued in Turkey on the case of Leyla Şahin, who was rejected from the Istanbul Medical Faculty on the basis of her headscarf. Supporters of the headscarf ban in Turkey immediately pointed to this, the highest court in Europe, as having backed their national struggle. Other said the court's decision was a sign that it did not have the courage to ignore the most important principle of the Turkish state, secularity. There were very few, however, who actually applied a careful reading to the ruling by this European court. It would not be correct to say that the court's ruling put an end to debates over the headscarf in Turkey. Though the judges, considering secularity based on democracy, perceive Turkey's banning of headscarves and full beards in university students as only a sign Turkey's following of the European Human Rights Accords (EVRM), this does not mean that the ban on headscarves is necessarily a good thing. In addition, the dissenting view of a Belgian judge with regard to whether Leyla Şahin's rights had been violated was interesting. Someone examining the decision carefully might conclude that, rather than putting an end to the headscarf debate, the Strasbourg court's decision in fact signalled a new start. There are still some questions left unanswered, and these need to be answered not in Strasbourg, but in Turkey. The ironic aspect to the "Turkey v. Şahin" case is that the Turkish government agreed whole-heartedly with the opening up of the case. Erdoğan is from the ranks of those who are openly opposed to the ban on headscarves, and in fact his own daughters attended an American university in order to avoid this ban. It appears, however, that for now Atatürk's legacy carries more weight than the desires of the administration and the wishes of the majority of the Turkish population.

Another election period promise made by the AK Party had to do with education, and in particular, the "imam hatip" high schools, which are high schools with a religious bent. This is a sensitive subject, and one which played an important role in the 1997 "soft military coup." Imam-hatip schools in Turkey are educational facilities designed to educate imams and religious orators, or prayer leaders for mosques. These are schools which offer, in addition to the normal curriculum, around 18 hours a week of Koran instruction and theology. Strong

supporters of the secular ideology in Turkey have always approached these schools with a great deal of suspicion. At the beginning of the 1990s, the number of students attending these schools reached its highest point, yet after the 1997 coup, it became much more difficult for students at imam-hatip schools to continue with their education.

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