

# TODAY'S ZAMAN

## The dark side of Turkey

Today's Zaman **Sahin Alpay**

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I did not vote for the Justice and Development Party (AKP), either in the 2002 or the 2007 elections. I will not call it the "AK [clean] Party" before I am convinced that it is free of corruption. I disapprove of many AKP policies. Its appearance as a "Sunni party" bothers me greatly. Its zigzags between a stance first in favor of lifting restrictions and then against lifting restrictions on the linguistic and cultural rights of Turkey's Kurdish minority bother me even more.

I am worried that the AKP is inclined to hold on to power within the status quo, rather than further democratizing it. I believe that it has committed serious mistakes by appointing or electing to important public offices - including the presidency - individuals only it trusts, rather than those who have earned broad public confidence. I am strongly opposed to the headscarf ban in universities, but I suspect the AKP has fallen into a trap by rushing to amend the Constitution to lift the ban on the proposal with the support of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), when it was quite obvious that the Constitutional Court was almost certain to declare the amendments unconstitutional and thus reinforce the ban. I am also aware that the AKP government, after achieving the start of accession negotiations with the EU in 2005, has, unfortunately, stalled efforts toward further democratization.

My differences with and criticism of the AKP government do not, however, stop me from seeing the AKP as a great achievement of Turkish democracy. The AKP has demonstrated to the whole world that, given a democratic regime, an Islamist movement can transform itself into a centrist one. The leaders of the AKP have learned from mistakes, left behind Islamism and adopted the most liberal political and economic party platform Turkey has so far seen. On these grounds, I confess that I have great respect for the AKP leadership.

The AKP governments have achieved between 2002 and 2005 what has been rightly called a "quiet revolution" by consistently pursuing the IMF-anchored economic stability program and EU-anchored political reforms. Turkey today is undoubtedly a far more prosperous and free country, compared to what it was before. This is surely the main reason why the AKP raised its share of the vote from 34 percent in 2002 to 40 percent in 2004 and finally 47 percent in 2007. The AKP is today a centrist and

unifying party whose government has the trust of the broad majority of the people, importantly including citizens of Kurdish origin.

What the AKP government's opponents have tried to do to it is compatible neither with the rule of law nor with political ethics. The main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) is clearly hoping to somehow come to power by spreading unfounded fears that secularism is in danger. The MHP, after having suggested and supported the constitutional amendments to lift the headscarf ban, is now supporting the closure case against the AKP in the hope of increasing its share of the vote in an election without the AKP. This is the quality of the parliamentary opposition in Turkey.

The extra-parliamentary opposition, on the other hand, has no respect for democracy or the rule of law. It has, from the first day of the AKP government's term in office, sought to topple it in one way or another. The AKP government supported the solution of the Cyprus problem on the basis of the Annan plan and the accession of a united island to the EU. Through Rauf Denktaş's intransigence, this was subverted, and the greatest obstacle to Turkey's accession was thus created. There were two attempts at military coups in 2003 and 2004. In 2006 a Council of State judge was murdered, which now appears to have been a provocation against the government. A year ago mass demonstrations were held against the government which now appear to have been organized by the coup plotters of 2003-2004.

At midnight on April 27, 2007 a statement posted on the General Staff's Web site implied that the military would seize power if Abdullah Gül, then the AKP foreign minister, was to be elected president by Parliament. The Constitutional Court was thus put under pressure to stop his election. And now, finally, a case for the closure of the AKP is before the Constitutional Court.

It is impossible to make sense of the latest events in Turkey without an insight into the country's dark side. A report prepared by the European Stability Initiative (ESI) that gives a comprehensive account of that side of Turkey is now available for English readers on its Web site. It is titled "Turkey's dark side. Party closures, conspiracies and the future of democracy" (April 2008).