

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Turkish Test

Matthew Kaminski The Wall Street Journal
July 20, 2007

ISTANBUL -- Sunday's parliamentary elections here will make for yet another chapter in the long clash between secularism and Islam in Turkey.

Simmering disputes between partisans on both sides came to a boil with May's presidential elections. Street protests against the ruling and religiously oriented Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its candidate for president encouraged the army chiefs to stage the softest of their "soft coups" -- in this case a midnight Internet missive warning that "some circles . . . disturb fundamental values of the Republic of Turkey, especially secularism." Turkey's highest court, another secular bastion, got the message and followed up with a technical, but patently political, ruling on parliamentary quorums. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan angrily withdrew his candidate, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul (who was assured to win the presidency in a straight parliament vote). To defuse tensions, early parliamentary elections were called and the presidential vote postponed.

None of it was very legitimate and the relief is bound to be temporary. With a wide lead in polls over the secular and national parties who dominated Turkish politics before falling out of favor over their corruption and economic mismanagement earlier this decade, Mr. Erdogan will almost certainly return and demand to pick the next president and push a constitutional overhaul to give his party a freer hand. Long the stewards of Kemal Ataturk's secular Republic, the military may be tempted to push back, perhaps not so softly this time. Kurdish terrorism in the southeast and the European Union's latest anxiety attack over Turkey's membership bid further complicate the outlook.

The urbanization of the countryside

So this strategic and close Western ally is doomed to turmoil? Not necessarily. In spite of what appear as irreconcilable differences, never in its history has Turkey been as prosperous or free. But even secularists acknowledge that Ataturk's 1923 design for modern Turkey -- with its fanatical opposition to religion in public life -- is overdue for an update. The surprise is that the AKP has taken the modernization mantle from the secularists. Aside from well-publicized exceptions such as Mr. Erdogan's thwarted attempt to criminalize adultery, the AKP has made its mark by opening up the economy and by liberalizing laws on women's and Kurdish rights, free speech and civil liberties. And in an unfortunate role reversal, the once pro-Western secular parties have turned against the political and economic reforms demanded by the EU and backed by the AKP.

For a glimpse of the new Turkey, where economic growth has averaged 7% annually since 2001, look around Istanbul. Right off the Bosphorus are gleaming business districts, garish nightclubs and bustling street

scenes straight out of London or New York. Further inland the lower- and lower-middle class suburbs, called varos, are rising. With a million people in the 1950s, Turkey's commercial hub is today home, officially, to 10 million, but probably far more. Most of the new residents migrated from rural areas. The share of the urban population jumped from 41% in 1975 to 65% in 2000, and is rising; last year, 2 million moved into the cities.

The old urban order, accustomed to running the country, is unsettled by their new neighbors, their village habits and mores. Ilber Ortayli, the director of the Topkapi palace in Istanbul and a noted historian of the Ottomans, despairs at the sight of "these peasants," whose women tend to cover their heads with scarves and whose men wear moustaches. Novelist Elif Shafak says that Turkish "elites fear the masses" and hold their own people in contempt -- which Tolstoy also noted about pre-Revolutionary Russia, and can be said about most, if one may, "post-peasant societies." The GOP's Christian evangelical voters in America are talked about in similarly dismissive terms.

- - -

The mustachioed Mr. Erdogan, a former businessman and Istanbul mayor, himself emerged from the varos, and later tapped into massive support there for his AKP. The party's pro-business and anti-corruption planks, as well as pledges to loosen restrictions on wearing headscarves that date back to the Republic's early years, play well with this constituency of entrepreneurial and socially-conservative shopkeepers and blue-collar workers -- many of whom lately made the jump into the middle class. The AKP has injected funds for schools along with other goodies into the varos -- Islamist pork, so to speak.

But the AKP is hardly radical in its Islamic orientation. Its leaders were chastened by their brief stints in power in the 1990s; they've adopted and mostly stuck to a liberal agenda this time. The party bridges the traditional and modern world. To claim around 40% in recent polls, the AKP needs to attract its share of secular voters.

In this campaign, AKP leaders are able to claim credit for overseeing the growth of a sophisticated market economy, which like its democracy also makes Turkey unique in the Muslim world. (The bazaar image is a few decades out of date.) The AKP pushed the most far-reaching privatization in Turkey's history. Corporate, income and sales taxes were cut. Unusually for the region, growth was driven by private consumption and investment, as the government kept a tight lid on its own spending. Turks who work outside the state sector showed their business

chops, with exports up three-fold in the last five years. Foreign investment is 10 times the 2002 figure, at \$20 billion last year. The secular elites aren't well-placed to appreciate the economic transformation of the past five years and its political consequences. Among Ataturk's Six Principles was "statism," and his political heirs are attached to socialist dogma.

Though there is widespread agreement that Turkey is headed in the right economic direction, cultural issues such as the headscarf are the focus of bitter debate. As in Ataturk's model, France, Turkey legislates on women's clothing, banning headscarves in schools and government offices. The AKP claims to want to institute positive rights to let women wear whatever wherever they please. The secularists see a slippery slope to enforced piety if the law is changed or, as worrying, a future Turkish First Lady, like Mrs. Gul, covers her hair.

This debate goes beyond religion. The headscarf was always a symbol of backwoods Turkey -- as, by the same token, women in Polish or Greek villages wear them. Also in a traditional peasant society, the baba (or father) claims the right to control his wife or daughter, whether the Jacobin secularist who insists on a bare head or the Islamist on covered hair.

But here too things aren't quite what they seem. True enough, more girls in Turkish cities can be seen in headscarves than a decade or two ago. But is this a sign of rising Islamism? Or of Turkey's new economic and social pluralism?

As with much else, gender roles have shifted dramatically so that the headscarf doesn't automatically signal provincialism, submission or lack of education. Secular or not, women are asserting themselves in politics and business. The activist women's NGOs linked to the AKP gave rise to the term "Islamic feminism." Another irony is that the AKP has pushed women's rights further than any government since Ataturk abolished polygamy and Islamist courts. As part of an overhaul of the 1926 Penal Code, the AKP criminalized rape in marriage, eliminated sentence reductions for "honor killings," and ended legal discrimination against non-virgin and unmarried women.

Hardly noted feminists, the men of AKP knew these changes were popular with women constituents and the EU. Stopping "honor killings" and other medieval family/tribal justice customs also marks an attempt to bring rule of law and the modern state to remote rural regions. "With the new Penal Code," notes a European Stability Initiative report, "Turkey's legislation entered the post-patriarchal era." Needless to say, the secularists who accused the AKP of repressing women at the big protests in Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir this spring give them little credit.

Social or political Islam?

Mr. Erdogan makes no secret of wanting to relieve pressure on "social Islam." Secularists charge he secretly wants to implant "political Islam," which in the name of democracy would destroy it.

Anecdotes about alcohol bans in AKP strongholds or teachers bringing religion into classroom make headlines

in Turkey's lively press, but are hardly proof of systematic Islamization. Lacking that, secularists fall back on surruration about the AKP's ulterior motives. Orhan Pamuk, who last year won Turkey's first Nobel, for literature, once told me, "Every time there's a political debate in this country we don't discuss what's really happening but what are the hidden intentions."

So what is happening? With economic and political flowering of recent years has come a cultural and religious one too. According to one recent survey, 61% of Turks call themselves "very" or "quite" religious, compared with 31% in 1999. But Turks are also developing a clearer civic identity separate from Islam. The share of people who describe themselves first as "citizens of Turkey" -- as opposed to ethnic Turks or Muslims -- went up to 34.1% in 2006, from 29.9% seven years ago.

They're souring on political Islam, too. Opposition to the imposition of Shariah (Islamic law) rose from 67.9% in 1999 to 76.2% in 2006, while support for it fell from 21% to 9%. And oh, the overall number of women in headscarves is dropping steadily. Just goes to show that prosperity and democracy tends to secularize without need for coercion. - - The last three months have left voters bitter about politics. Mr. Erdogan's thin skin and arrogance can make the general staff look the model of civility; as a bunch, Turkish politicians aren't a pretty lot. But the flexible AKP machine responded to the crisis in the spring by purging 150 of its most hardline MPs from the electoral list and moving the party further into the mainstream. Independents are expected to claim a larger, possibly decisive block of seats. Political compromise is not a bad thing, as long as Turkey doesn't revert back to do-nothing coalition governments.

America can do worse than strongly encourage the Turks to play by democratic rules, especially by keeping the military in the barracks. Continued European engagement on future EU membership -- in jeopardy thanks to Continental politicians unable to think strategically (the latest being France's Nicolas Sarkozy) -- helps guide domestic reforms. Turkey is a crucial NATO state that borders Iran, Iraq, the Caucasus, Balkans and Mideast.

And though not an Arab country -- an important cultural and historical distinction -- Turkey is on a journey toward becoming a mature democratic nation-state that its Mideast neighbors have barely started, but are watching closely. In the past few years, Turks asked hard questions about themselves. Can Turkey stick together if Kurds get minority rights? If discussion of the 1915 Armenian massacres is opened up? If women wear headscarves in schools? If the army stays out of politics? Most fundamentally, can public space be carved out in a Muslim country for Islam in a way that safeguards the rights of believers and nonbelievers and strengthens democracy in the process?

How unfortunate it would be to fail to get answers, and if this remarkable period in Turkish history were -- in the name of some 1920s-era notion of secularism -- prematurely brought to an end. Such an outcome would lead to the conclusion that Muslim polities are incorrigibly illiberal, unable to stomach real democracy. Though their politics are messy and sometimes violent, the Turks give us good reason to believe otherwise.