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Coup.com: Turkey Conquers the Politics of Fear

JENNY WHITE

Despite the high-decibel rhetoric about the Justice and Development Party (known by its Turkish acronym AKP) being an Islamist threat to Turkey's democracy, the party won a resounding mandate in the July 22 parliamentary election. This means that the majority of Turks have rejected the politics of fear spread by AKP's rivals and understand that the struggle in Turkey is not between Islamists and secularists, but between rival elites in a zero-sum game where the success of one diminishes the power and wealth of the other. Traditional republican elites entrenched in state institutions, business, and the military have been calling the shots for decades. The upstart AKP and the socially conservative majority that supports it not only have a corner on political power, but also have begun to do well enough to challenge the republicans in globalization and economic development. The presence or absence of a headscarf has become emblematic of much broader issues in a power struggle between segments of the population. This election marks the high-water point for the AKP, but the politics of fear that preceded it continues to threaten Turkey's hard-won stability.

Since it came to power in 2002 on a wave of popular revulsion against corrupt and ineffectual secular parties, AKP has initiated a courageous programme of reform in a bid to join the European Union. Ironically, those who continue to tout the superiority of a secular European lifestyle are the least likely to appreciate the introduction of European-inspired liberal values that loosen state control of religious practices

and clothing (headscarves are currently banned in government institutions, including universities) and that expand the rights of Turkey's ethnic and religious minorities. Some of the Turkish old guard view minorities like the Armenian, Greek Orthodox, and Jewish communities as a European fifth column intent on undermining Turkish territorial integrity. Forced to play the nationalist card in the pre-election dust-up, AKP seems unwilling to challenge conservative forces blocking implementation of new laws that broaden ethnic and religious minority rights.

The election hothouse

Since so much rested on this election, attempts to manipulate public opinion took a dangerous turn that threatened—and continues to threaten—both Turkey's democracy and its chances for European Union membership. The most important of these was the unexpectedly bold entry of Turkey's military onto the political playing field after almost a decade of acquiescence to the elected government's programmes. The last major military intervention in politics was the so-called "soft coup" of 1997, in which the military-dominated National Security Council, an advisory body to the government, pushed out an Islamist prime minister the army suspected of being insufficiently committed to the secular foundation of the state. Since then, the military's power on the council and elsewhere has begun to be reduced in line with European Union requirements that a

The controversies surrounding the Turkish elections should not be seen as a clash between secularists and Islamists, but rather as a struggle between various elites. In fact, the disavowal of its Islamist agenda has enabled the AKP to occupy the centre of the political spectrum formerly held by the Kemalist establishment. These shifts and turns have come at a price: nationalism and corruption seem to be on the rise. The author concludes that the real danger is that these power struggles will disable Turkey to develop its global, liberal democratic credentials.

nation's military be subordinate to its elected government.

In the hothouse atmosphere preceding the election, the army resorted to a new tool to influence politics—its website www.tsk.mil.tr. On April 27, parliament had voted to put forward the name of the well-respected AKP foreign minister Abdullah Gül to replace Turkey's strongly secular president, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, whose term had come to an end. The opposition Republican People's Party (RPP) claimed the vote was invalid because it lacked a

quorum. That night the military posted a memorandum on its website that has come to be called the first coup by website or "cyber coup." In the unsigned statement, the army threatened to interfere if the election of Gül, whose wife wears a headscarf, went ahead. In following weeks, further statements were posted. One called for a social reaction against "forces who act in the guise of democracy and freedom of speech," leading many to wonder if the army was urging a popular uprising against the government and liberal institutions. Millions demonstrated in support of the military's guardianship of secularism, but a new generation has come of age in Turkey with no experience of coups against elected governments (the last of which was in 1980) that was surprised and disturbed by such blatant intervention in the democratic process. This may well have had an impact on the election outcome—AKP won 46.7% of the vote and 341 of the 550 seats in parliamentary—as thousands of newly eligible young voters had their say.

As a result of the April 27 "cyber coup," the government moved parliamentary elections that had been scheduled for fall to July 22 in the hopes that a larger AKP presence in parliament would ensure a quorum and make it politically difficult for the military to counter the wishes of a democratically elected government with a clear mandate. The AKP also put on the table a proposal to amend the constitution to allow the president to be elected by popular vote, a proposition recently approved by the Constitutional Court and which will be subjected to a popular referendum in October. Despite a higher percentage of votes than in the last election, however, AKP gained fewer seats in the new parliament due to the entry of a third party. The Nationalist Action Party (NAP), which has been associated with ultranationalist violence in the past, picked up 71 seats and will join the militantly secular RPP in opposition. Such a powerful nationalist coalition might well block future liberal reforms. If the new parliament is unable to elect a president within sixty days, the Constitution requires that general elections be held again, prolonging the turmoil and uncertainty. In an interesting development, 23 Kurdish nationalist members of the Democratic Society Party (DSP) were elected to parliament as independent candidates, a ploy that allowed the Kurdish party to avoid the ten percent vote threshold for party representation in parliament. Surprisingly for socially conservative eastern and southeastern Anatolia, fifteen of the newly elected deputies from that region are women, most of them members of the DSP, rather than mainstream parties. The Kurdish DSP delegates are a wild card in future coalition building.

The military has put the AKP's back against the wall by repeatedly and publicly asking the elected government to authorize a military operation into northern Iraq to combat the PKK, a banned Kurdish separatist organization that is using the region as a base from which to attack Turkey. The AKP government so far has resisted, arguing that the Kurdish problem should be addressed first on the Turkish side of the border, but its refusal to authorize military action in Iraq makes it look soft on terror. If the government does authorize a military incursion, it

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will damage relations with the United States and the EU and potentially open the door to a regional conflagration between Turkey (a NATO country) and the Iraqi Kurds, whom Turkey accuses of aiding the PKK, possibly engaging the central Iraqi government and even U.S. forces. A Turkish incursion would give tacit permission for other neighbouring countries like Iran to enter the Iraqi quagmire ostensibly to hunt down their own terror candidates. The Turkish military, which does not like the AKP government, will continue to apply pressure, aided by the RPP and NAP. In the meantime, it continues to mass troops and equipment along the Iraqi border.

Immediate and potential dangers

A further aspect of Turkey's politics of fear are the links emerging between ultranationalist violence and a group of former military officers. The alliance between Kemalist extremists and ultranationalists suspicious of religious and ethnic minorities runs deep. Evidence emerged in the 1980s and 1990s of something Turks call the "deep state," a mysterious group of conspirators with connections high in the state and military bureaucracy that over many years funded and protected violent groups that killed Kurdish leaders, leftist intellectuals, journalists, judges, and other broadly defined "enemies of the state." Recently links have been found between these former officers and suspects in the murder of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink and several other political murders over the past year. There also appears to be cross-fertilization between ultra-nationalists and fringe radical Islamists, the outlines of which are only now becoming clear.

While the more immediate threat to Turkish democracy appears to be coming from the secular camp, creeping conservatism, corruption and the dangers of political monopolization are legitimate causes for concern that are driving the campaign against AKP. People fear that the AKP will consolidate power over all branches of government, leaving no counterbalancing power. (The opposition RPP lost votes in this election and is widely viewed as lacking leadership or new ideas.) The AKP has disavowed Islam as a political ideology, yet contains under its broad umbrella a core group of committed Islamists who would like to ban the sale and consumption of alcohol in public places, hold conservative ideas about gender roles and are unwelcoming of women in the public arena or in positions of authority and power, and who are generally as intolerant of secular lifestyles as Kemalists are of Muslim ones. Nevertheless, the AKP fielded more female candidates in this election than the RPP and the number of women legislators doubled to over eight percent. But conservative and nationalist influences have undermined the implementation and effectiveness of many of the liberal laws passed by the AKP as part of its alignment with EU requirements, particularly those broadening ethnic and religious minority rights.

The dangerous hot and cold games the EU has been playing with Turkey's membership bid have exacerbated Turkish suspicions about Europe's ultimate aims in the region, inflamed nationalist sentiment, and emboldened ultranationalists whose actions, in a self-fulfilling cycle, add to Turkey's negative tally on the part of Europeans who do not wish to see the country join the EU. The United States also has been unwilling or unable to pressure Iraqi Kurds to stop the PKK from crossing into Turkey. In Turkey, this seeming disregard of Turkey's own terror situations appears unforgivable and is a major cause for the growth of anti-U.S. sentiment.

In his post-election speech, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan re-committed to the path of EU membership and reform. General Yasar Buyukanit, the chief of general staff, however, also reiterated the army's position regarding Gül's candidacy. Gül has signalled he still wishes to run for the presidency, keeping the government on a collision course with the army. Turkey's military establishment, which sees itself as the

guardian of Atatürk's dream of a westernized Turkey, must now decide whether the project of joining the West (in the form of the EU) will be a sufficient safeguard of Turkish national identity and secular lifestyle that they can permit themselves to be slowly shorn of power. Anyone witnessing the struggles that have convulsed the EU about the role of religion, minorities, and fears about loss of national sovereignty and identity can well understand the Turkish military's scepticism and reluctance to take the dream of westernization to its conclusion.

What is most frightening to Turkey's old elite is AKP's increasing ability to occupy the centre, where most Turkish voters' interests lie. A popular and centrist AKP devoted to liberal values is much more of a threat to the secularist, westernized, but essentially illiberal establishment than an AKP harbouring a secret Islamist agenda. AKP has been successful where the old guard has not—at least not since the 1980s—in uniting Turkey's fractious political field and occupying the centre. The establishment's response has been to spread fear that secularist lifestyles are in danger and the nation is being undermined by foreign powers. The AKP has been forced to turn aside from its own reform agenda to prove itself to be as nationalist as its opponents. Nationalism has shown itself to be a dangerous force in the past, used to manipulate public sentiment that all too easily can spill over into violence. The real question is whether post-election Turkey can get back to the business of developing its global, liberal democratic credentials or whether the pre-election games of Turkey's embattled elites will have damaged the social fabric and the democratic process to such an extent that Turkey's future will be derailed.

Political posters in Kayseri, Turkey



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