



Harbingers of Turkey's Second Republic

Kerem Öktem Middle East Report
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On July 23, the day after the ruling Justice and Development Party won Turkey's early parliamentary elections in a landslide, Onur Öymen, deputy chairman of the rival Republican People's Party (CHP), interpreted the results as follows:

If you are in need and hungry, if you are not at all content with your life, if you criticize the government every day from dusk till dawn and you then vote for the very same government, there must be something which cannot be explained with logic. What is it? It is the government's policy to harness the religious feelings of the people for political aims. If the people, despite all these hardships, still vote for this party, that probably means that they vote for them because of religion.... If illogical reasons play such an important role in politics, this should make us think.^[1]

At first, this explanation seems to comport with the common media depiction of the Turkish elections as a final showdown between "secularists" and "Islamists," and with alarmist debates over whether Turkey has ceased to be the secular country it has nominally been since Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founded the republic in 1923. Those debates, after all, draw their urgency from the ruling party's origins in political Islam. Upon closer review, however, Öymen's reading owes more to another Kemalist notion, one redolent with the "Enlightenment fundamentalism" that Timothy Garton Ash has identified in the European debate on Islam and Muslims. According to this patrician view, "the people" -- as distinguished from full citizens -- are a backward mass, incapable of knowing what is best for themselves, and at constant risk of being led further into the darkness by religious fundamentalist agitators. In the minds of Öymen's colleagues, as well as their allies in the military and civilian bureaucracy, the CHP slogan of the 1920s, "For the people, despite the people," is very much alive.

Yet the results of Turkey's 2007 parliamentary elections suggest that patrician loyalty to modernization imposed upon the population from above has outlived the ability to impose such a Jacobin trajectory. The Turkey that is emerging from the July 22 elections is less beholden to the military-civilian elite that drove modernization from above, but is more diverse, more inclusive and, dare one say it, more modern.

THE RESULTS

The 2007 contests were the most deftly organized in Turkey since the first democratic elections in 1950. Although 84 percent of Turkey's 42.5 million voters cast ballots, both the voting and the counting of votes moved

along quickly, thanks to a newly digitized system. By 10 pm, almost 90 percent of the votes were counted, and victors as well as losers determined. The parliament will now host three party blocs, as well as contingents of independents. Out of 550 seats, 341 will belong to the ruling party, 112 to the CHP, 71 to the far-right Nationalist Action Party and 26 to the independents, most of whom are Kurds.

Justice and Development (AKP, as per its Turkish name, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) increased its share of the national vote from 34.3 percent in 2002, when it first swept into power, to 46.7 percent. It led the balloting in all but a few coastal provinces in the west. Even in locales where the AKP has traditionally been weak, such as İzmir, the CHP narrowly escaped defeat. In CHP leader Deniz Baykal's home province of Antalya, the ruling party came out on top. In the predominantly Kurdish southeast, though it did not win every province, the AKP more than doubled its vote from roughly 26 percent in 2002 to 53 percent. Thus, the AKP has not only established itself "in the societal center," as Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan proclaimed during his victory speech, but it has also emerged as the only political party that is backed strongly in all regions of Turkey. It is now the only party that has a legitimate claim to represent both Turks and Kurds, a substantial proportion of the non-Sunni Alevi community, and virtually all social classes. Surveys show that around half of the voters in the lower- and middle-income groups pulled the lever for the AKP, while around 35 percent of upper-middle and 23 percent of upper-income groups did the same. The economy's performance during the AKP's five years in office was pivotal in deciding voters' minds: Growth rates are at a constant 7 percent, per capita income has doubled, foreign direct investment has reached a record high, stock markets are rising, and trust in the lira, so badly hit by the financial crisis of 2001, has been restored.

The CHP, despite its recent merger with the late ex-premier Bülent Ecevit's Democratic Left Party, reached only 20.8 percent of the vote and fell below 10 percent in the Kurdish provinces. In Diyarbakır, considered by many Kurds as the political center of Turkey's Kurdish geography, CHP candidates attracted an abysmally low 1.9 percent. Faring well only in some western provinces, the CHP has now ceased to be a national party that enjoys support across regional and ethnic divides, and become instead a regional party rooted in Turkish identity politics.

While the Nationalist Action Party succeeded in doubling its vote to 14 percent, doing especially well in western and southern Turkey, 23 Kurdish candidates, running as

independents rather than under a Kurdish party banner to circumvent the country's infamous 10 percent threshold (whereby a party must win 10 percent of the national vote to get a seat), were elected from the southeastern provinces. Among the independents, Ufuk Uras stands out. Elected from Istanbul's Kadıköy district, he is supported by a coalition of socialists, feminists, and ethnic and sexual minorities.

As important as those who entered Parliament are those who failed to do so. The Islamist-fundamentalist Felicity Party, convener of the Milli Görüş movement from which the AKP's founding cadres hail, fell to less than 3 percent of the national vote. Effectively, Turkey's Islamist party is now defunct. The same can be said for center-right groupings like the Democrat and Motherland parties, and for movements like the Youth Party, set up to serve the interests of its prolific chairman Cem Uzan.

A MILESTONE FOR WOMEN

The composition of the new parliament accurately reflects the popular will, with the three successful parties accounting for more than 80 percent of all votes cast. And it is not only the general level of representation that has improved, but also the representation of women. Before 2007, women had never composed more than 4.5 percent of a Turkish parliament, and that mark was reached in the non-democratic, single-party elections of 1935. When electoral pluralism was introduced in 1950, three women made it to the legislature. By 2002, that number had improved to only 24 -- 4.4 percent of Parliament.

Quite contrary to secularists' fears that women's position would deteriorate under the AKP, slightly less than 10 percent of Parliament (49 members) is now female. This proportion is low compared to most European Union countries, yet it is undeniable that women are now a critical presence in Turkish formal politics for the first time. Numerous civil society actions, like the advertising campaign of the Association for the Support and Education of Women Candidates, which portrayed leading women wearing moustaches, the time-honored Turkish symbol of manly competence, pressured the AKP and CHP into making the top of their lists about 10 percent female. Unlike in former campaigns, where the few female candidates ran in the large cities on the western coast, 2007 saw the election of women from all parts of the country, especially for the AKP.

Nine Kurdish women, supported by the pro-Kurdish Democratic Turkey Party but running as independents, were elected from rural areas in southeast Turkey. These women have non-elite backgrounds and entered politics through their engagement in the Kurdish national movement. They will carry the mandate of Turkey's poorest, most disenfranchised and oppressed group, Kurdish women from the rural and suburban parts of the south-east.

BACKDROP OF BACKLASH

Given how smoothly the elections were conducted and how swiftly the results declared, it is hard to recall the atmosphere of intimidation before and during the campaign. Only a few weeks before citizens went to the polls, stable republican government in Turkey appeared to face a serious threat, up to and including full-blown military

intervention. The AKP cabinet's decision to hold early elections was a last-ditch effort to avert a political crisis partly of its own making.

The crisis unfolded over 2005-2007, with an increasingly belligerent "retro-nationalist" reaction to the government's reforms and its alleged hidden anti-secular agenda, as well as the anti-Turkish mood in many European quarters, as Turkey sought to advance its application to join the European Union. A coalition of anti-liberal forces, made up of retired generals and their civil society organizations, parts of the security services and far-right groups, brought about the climate of fear, aiming at convincing Turks that the political reforms and newly acquired freedoms would have to be relinquished. Xenophobic films, television series and books asserted that Turkey was under threat from the West, evoking and exploiting the "Sevres syndrome," a fear of the country's dismemberment harking back to the 1920 Treaty of Sevres that began the partition of the Ottoman Empire. The nationalist counter-movement was not confined to symbolic politics, but led to the assassination of a High Court judge, the murder of two Catholic priests, frequent incidents of mob violence against Kurdish activists, and the slaughter of two Turkish Christians and a German missionary in the southeastern city of Malatya in April 2007. These attacks were not carried out by religious fundamentalists, as was often insinuated in the press. Evidence suggests the authorship of extreme nationalist groups, such as one called Kuvva-i Milliye Derneği, whose new members are made to swear on the Qur'an and a gun.^[2] The court cases, most of which progress very slowly, have shown that the perpetrators were connected to parts of the state apparatus, either as informants or as double agents.

Parallel to the violence, a myriad of prosecutions were mounted against public intellectuals -- Nobel Prize laureate Orhan Pamuk, novelist Elif Shafak and publisher Ragıp Zarakolu, to cite but a few -- for statements questioning official conceptions of Turkish historiography. Accompanied by vicious hate campaigns in the nationalist and parts of the mainstream media, and coupled with the assassinations, these court cases further contributed to a sense of real intimidation. Yet probably the most momentous rupture was the murder in January 2007 of Turkish-Armenian journalist and activist Hrant Dink in broad daylight, in front of the newspaper *Agos* in central Istanbul. The killing seemed to squelch the free and frank debate on the fate of the Ottoman Armenians in 1915, initiated by a groundbreaking conference at which Dink spoke, and the resulting revisionist histories. Also extinguished was the life of a remarkable man, whose love for his country and commitment to the reconciliation of Turks and Armenians was a challenge to those whose project of a modern Turkey ignores or even approves of the Armenian suffering for which the Istanbul government was responsible. Despite the hostile climate, more than 100,000 demonstrators took to the street to declare that "We are all Hrant, we are all Armenians," only to be denounced by the nationalist press as traitors to the nation.

The ambient racism and retro-nationalism increasingly focused upon the Kurds, with the CHP leader Baykal resorting to an anti-EU, anti-US and anti-globalization discourse that resembled the language of Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front more closely than that of a modern social democratic party.

If the nationalist campaign first targeted liberal intellectuals and their questioning of Turkey's historical genesis, it soon turned to an old standby of Turkish politics: the purported Islamic threat to the secular state. Rumor spread that the military was hatching plans to depose the AKP cabinet. One critical weekly, *Nokta*, was closed by its owner after publishing a series on foiled coup attempts, as well as what it said were the blueprints of a retired naval commander for one of the aborted putsches. Like Pamuk and the others, *Nokta's* editor-in-chief was accused of "denigrating Turkishness." The message was clear. As Joost Lagendijk, co-chairman of the joint Turkey-EU Parliamentary Commission, put it: "Do not tamper with the military! If you make critical hints, then you end up in this situation. From now on, correspondents, editors and executives will think twice before publishing something that is critical of the military."

Yet it was only with the nomination of Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül as president that a constitutional crisis arose. Capitalizing on the prospect that the president's wife would wear a headscarf, groups such as the Association for Atatürkist Thought, the extreme nationalist Workers Party and the CHP built mass demonstrations to warn of the secular order's imminent destruction. Some analysts suggested that the demonstrations were an indicator of a "new middle class,"^[3] even though this term was initially coined to describe the support base of the AKP, the small and midsize industrialists of central Anatolia.^[4] Credible observers like Ali Bayramoğlu of the *Yeni Şafak* newspaper argued instead that the demonstrators were an "out-of-fashion middle class," and exposed the link between the organizers and extremist groups plotting a coup against the government. Although most demonstrators were acting in good faith, and women in particular aired concerns about certain conservative AKP policies, some also realized that they had become pawns of a deeply anti-democratic, extreme nationalist crusade under the guise of defending secularism.

Finally, on April 27, the armed forces published a blunt note on their official website (known in the press as the "e-memorandum" or, more darkly, the "e-coup") declaring that the swearing-in of a non-secular president (in other words, Gül) would lead to military intervention to save the secular regime. The CHP, after lengthy legal deliberations, walked out from the presidential ballot in the parliament in order to render invalid the AKP majority's vote for Gül. When the Constitutional Court decided, at the CHP's request, that Gül's selection was indeed null and void because of the lack of a two-thirds quorum, the crisis reached its peak. Early elections appeared to be the only way out of the deadlock, together with an AKP initiative to allow for direct elections for the presidency. Although the current president, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, returned the reform package to Parliament, the Constitutional Court ruled it constitutional, hence paving the way for a referendum on a direct presidential ballot.

In spite of nationalist hate campaigns, court cases and the e-memorandum, the Turkish electorate acted not out of fear, but out of a libertarian reflex that has strong precedents in Turkish history. In the first democratic elections of 1950, after more than two decades of single-party rule, the majority voted against the CHP and for the newly established Democrat Party. In the 1983 elections, the first since the 1980 military coup, the voters defeated the

generals' party of choice and instead brought the charismatic Turgut Özal into power. In 2007, in the words of the *Zaman* newspaper, they responded with a "people's memorandum" to the e-memorandum.

PROSPECTS AND POINTS OF TENSION

One of the first questions that Prime Minister Erdoğan and the new parliament will have to deal with is the choice of the new president, and later on, a referendum on direct presidential balloting. There are ambiguous signs from the AKP regarding the choice of the president. Senior party figures have said that the process will be conducted in good faith and in a "consensual manner." Erdoğan, however, made a point of appearing together with Gül, who insists on renewing his candidacy, at AKP headquarters following the announcement of the election results. At the same time, the prime minister acknowledged the unease of secular citizens, promising a political style that is respectful of individual political and lifestyle choices and the institutions of the secular republic.

Much will now depend on the attitude of the CHP, which did not benefit from the atmosphere of fear that it facilitated and whose leader now seems incapable of accepting defeat. The party has failed to stake out a position as a democratic alternative to the AKP, let alone consolidate itself as a force of the left. In the short term, the question is whether the CHP will continue its politics of disengagement, destructive opposition, coalition with anti-democratic forces and anti-EU and militarist discourses. If so, the CHP might create new crises by blocking legislation and, in particular, the presidential process. In the medium term, however, the stakes will be higher: The party, already under investigation by the Socialist International for its position supportive of military interventions, will ultimately have to face suspension or termination of its membership should it fail to disassociate itself from the nationalist, militarist and racist talk of its leading stratum. The success of internal opposition to Baykal will determine if the CHP transforms itself into a modern, liberal, inclusive social democratic party with a European outlook. Otherwise, it will further deteriorate into an alliance of inward-looking extreme nationalists, disgruntled former state elites and disoriented upper-middle class voters, who are united by disdain for the lifestyles of the AKP cadres, many of whom come from humble origins.

Another point of tension in the new parliament is the relative strength of the extreme Nationalist Action Party, which seems to be the only party that reaped rewards from the nationalist fear campaign, the debates over Turkey's threatened invasion of northern Iraq and the mounting violence in the southeast. Party chairman Devlet Bahçeli defused the initial concerns that Nationalist Action might pursue constant conflict with the Kurdish independent candidates. To what extent a *modus vivendi* will prevail between these two blocs depends on factors ranging from AKP policy toward northern Iraq to the independents' ability to play the political game according to the rules of Ankara. Yet many agree that a Nationalist Action Party in Parliament may be less aggressive than outside.

Turkey's "double gravity" location within Europe and the Middle East will also shape much of the AKP's foreign policy challenges.^[5] In the Middle East, the government will have to find a balance between the armed forces' request for military intervention in northern Iraq and a

political solution to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) presence on Iraqi Kurdish territory. The mandate it received, especially from its Kurdish voters, excludes a bellicose stance. Hence, the future will depend on the United States' willingness to take proactive steps toward containment of the PKK and its incursions into Turkish territory.

On the European front, the AKP appears committed to reinvigorating the quest for EU membership, despite the pre-election slowdown in meeting the requirements delineated by Brussels. In his election-night victory speech, Erdoğan underlined that the legal reform process will resume. With many liberal intellectuals, like the constitutional jurist Zafer Üskül, in the bloc of AKP legislators, prospects look good for a new civilian constitution that will replace the military-imposed and anti-democratic constitution of 1982.

The positive atmosphere could indeed lead to a gradual return to a more EU-friendly outlook among the wary Turkish public, contingent, of course, on statements from European capitals. French President Nicolas Sarkozy's insistence on every possible occasion, even directly after the July 22 elections, that Turkey should have a "privileged partnership" -- not membership -- do not bode well. The EU, and especially the European Commission, could instead use the sense of a new beginning to launch a charm offensive.

WINNING OVER HEARTS AND MINDS

Compared to the late 1970s, when it was a poor country with a patrician state and an elite bureaucracy uninterested in the common man, the Turkey of today is another world. It is rapidly transforming into an industrialized country with a globalized economy, a predominantly urban population, a modernizing infrastructure, unparalleled (if very unevenly distributed) individual wealth and increasingly audible demands for rights from ethnic, religious, cultural and lifestyle groups. The AKP, despite its roots in political Islam, has succeeded in capturing the desires and hopes of almost every other citizen of Turkey, providing a credible alternative to the "Enlightenment fundamentalists" of the CHP. It has also delivered on issues of infrastructure, health care and social security, making a tangible impact on the lives of lower-income people. To give but one example: The average citizen, surely an internal immigrant, used to travel up to 20 hours by bus from Istanbul to his or her distant homeland. Today, he or she flies from Istanbul to Trabzon or Diyarbakır.

In the field of cultural and individual rights and freedoms, the AKP government has followed an erratic policy. Nevertheless, despite its overly cautious position toward Kurdish rights, it has won over the hearts and minds of a majority of the voters in the southeast. It has become a defender of democracy, if not in its own right, then because of its resistance to military interference in the democratic process.

Patrician overlords like Onur Öymen remain at a loss to understand the reasons for their electoral demise, probably because they look at the country through the lens of xenophobic conspiracy theories. Their inability to come to terms with the "logic" of a globalizing world and the erosion of what Bayramoğlu calls a "statist and introverted caste system defending their comfortable status quo" has exposed them as members of an arrogant elite that has lost its hold upon society. More importantly, it has deprived Turkey's democracy of a center-left party and a credible political opposition, with attendant risks for a sustainable democratic process.

The landslide victory of the AKP has established beyond reasonable doubt that there is no popular support for this military-bureaucratic "caste system." The AKP's greatest challenge now is to continue the legal and political reform process and to expand the space of individual freedoms and rights without abusing its prerogatives. If it succeeds in this, it will not only become the party to transform Turkey into a modern European country. It will also prove that political Islam, under the conditions of a secular legal framework and economic progress, can transform itself into a democratic political project with a strong ethical stance and respect for diversity and human rights. With its strong mandate from the people of Turkey, the new AKP government is highly unlikely to face any substantial intervention from extra-parliamentary precincts. In the future, July 22, 2007 may well be seen as the birthday of Turkey's second republic.

Kerem Öktem is a research associate at St. Antony's College, University of Oxford.

Endnotes

[1] Radikal, July 24, 2007.

[2] Zaman, July 25, 2007.

[3] Devrim Sevimay, quoted in Milliyet, May 21, 2007.

[4] See European Stability Initiative, *Islamic Calvinists: Change and Conservatism in Central Anatolia* (Istanbul/Berlin, September 2005).

[5] See Philip Robins, "A Double Gravity State: Turkish Foreign Policy Reconsidered," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 33/2 (November 2006).