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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that define U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@MIT.EDU, 617.253.1965)

Turkey: Misperceptions and the Healing Touch of Democracy

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Mass demonstrations in late April brought out hundreds of thousands of people in Ankara and perhaps a million people one week later in Istanbul, an awesome scene on both occasions. Demonstrations of lesser scale are underway in smaller cities like Canakkale and Manisa—a trend to continue until early elections scheduled for July 22. The demonstrations were comprised of mainly women and middle-class urban people who chanted their allegiance to secularism and a modern way of life, which they believed to be endangered by the religious leanings of the incumbent government. But is this a legitimate fear?

The same government, led by the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* or AKP), has been in place since its electoral victory in 2002 and no substantial alteration took place in the basic tenets of the regime. Now, with the prospect of the election of the first Turkish president from this party, anxieties are high. The fear that such a danger is imminent has to be sociologically accounted for.

Fear and Loathing in the Old Center

Looking at the banners carried by the crowds at the demonstrations, one can see considerable resentment against the United States and the European Union. This could be indicative of the frustration of the Turkish middle classes, which feel left out of the global process. If so, their wrath is misguided because it is the AKP that has brought Turkey closer to western organizations and legal and economic standards than any “secular” government in recent Turkish history.

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Then could it be a power struggle between the new center and the old center? Indeed the AKP has been instrumental in conveying peripheral social groups to the political and economic center in recent years. In contrast, the old and mainly bureaucratic center became obsolete and increasingly dysfunctional because they could not read internal and global changes. Now, the old center wants to gain back its hold on politics as well as its waning privileged position. Within this context, the old center perceived a great danger to its power and privilege (you can read this as “raison d’etre”) and took the opportunity to exert itself through the military manifesto (the veiled threats of the strong military to intervene again in politics to prevent AKP from electing a president) and drawing on the fears of the middle class, which feels unrepresented, unguided, and increasingly uninfluential in politics. For the old center, which identifies itself as “secularists,” monopolization of all state positions (presidency of the parliament, the prime minister, and the presidency of the republic) by AKP was too much. The AKP has a majority in the parliament and the prime ministry; only the post of president of the republic remains unattained.

The demonstrations that have mobilized considerable urban masses supported by the declaration of the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) made three things unequivocally clear:

- 1) The AKP may have the parliamentary majority but it draws on a minority popular support that has been artificially inflated because of the flawed election system. A party that does not gain 10 percent of the vote is not represented in parliament, and this election threshold not only squanders an enormous amount of votes (45 percent overall in the latest election) but also adds more weight to the proportionate gains of those parties that surpass the threshold.
- 2) Drawing on this exaggerated gain, the AKP had translated its electoral success to having two-thirds of the seats in parliament. Given the constitutional rule that the parliament elects the president, the AKP came to the brink of adding the presidency to its spoils. They would have controlled the legislature, the government (executive) and if they had acquired the presidency (who selects members of high courts and the board of higher education as well), they could not be stopped or challenged. Because parliament elects the president, AKP would take complete control of the state apparatus. Given the weakness of civil society and the incomplete division of powers, there would be no way of containing the “onslaught” of the “Islamist” party.
- 3) It is no secret that the AKP started out representing the conservative peripheral social cohorts. Religiosity is at the core of conservatism. When AKP moved to the center by means of the electoral process, religiosity and symbols associated with it—like the head scarf—became more visible in the public sphere. This visibility was met with panic by the old center and charged as a danger to the secular regime. None of the old guard explained or asked themselves where these people came from.

Some of the AKP members displayed childish power wielding, making rash statements like “democracy is not an end but only a means” or “secularism must be debated” in the early phases of their public appearance. This was enough to keep them under surveillance and to fuel the fears of the secular urban classes. The AKP government did nothing significant to kindle this suspicion except perhaps appointing like-minded officials to important government posts and uttering sporadic statements like, “a president must be democratic, bipartisan and religious.” But then every government in Turkey has been accused of partisanship and nepotism.

For these reasons, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey’s most powerful and popular politician, could not break through the widespread opposition (including bureaucratic officials) to be a presidential candidate. Instead he nominated Abdullah Gul, the current minister of foreign affairs whose candidacy was also challenged by the military for the same reasons. An amiable person and a successful foreign minister, he had a better chance than most candidates of all leanings.

Two things sparked the public uproar. One was the Turkish military, which has always seen itself as the guardian of the secular system in Turkey and intervened with no concern to democratic principles. For the military, the “integrity” of the state was more

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important than democracy. Ironically, democracy is perceived equally instrumental by TAF as the putative challengers of the secular system.

Another reason was the way in which Gul was announced as a candidate—no prior consultation with other political forces was pursued, nor was his name popularly sounded. The AKP left the nomination of the presidential candidate to its leader, Prime Minister Erdogan. He exercised this unorthodox prerogative as virtually choosing the next president.

The Deeper Issues

Now that the political crisis created around the presidential elections has been halted by calling for early national elections, we can analyze what happened in Turkey as a shining example of reconciling a predominantly Muslim population with a secular state. An alternative question may be: How easily could forces, which have no political accountability to the electorate, interrupt the democratic process?

These questions gained urgency especially after the two mass demonstrations and the threatening memorandum of the army, which made it obvious that the generals will not tolerate the AKP's full grip on the state apparatus if the party elects the president. This means, no matter how democratic the election process is and how diligently legal procedures are abided by, the army as the voice of the secular establishment is not willing to tolerate a president elected by the AKP that is suspected of harboring a fundamentalist agenda and waiting for an opportune time to implement it. Otherwise, in a fully mature democracy where souls and minds would not be so polluted, the election of the candidate of the AKP would be a foregone conclusion.

Is this really a concrete danger to the secular way of life? This way of life has not actually been directly challenged by the AKP in its four-year government. Or is the current tension due to the power struggle between the elected and the appointed? The bureaucracy in Turkey has always felt to be the self-appointed protector of the state, which is mainly defined by two tenets: republican and secular. If even the theocratic regime of Iran is a republic, then it is not the republic that is under threat.

If less than 10 percent (in fact 9 percent) of the populace see the sharia law as a better legal system and a government that has adopted it as a better way of governance, as a 2006 survey (by the think tank, TESEV) indicated, there can be no near and clear danger in this respect as well. Then signs and symbols of religious preferences such as the turban, piety, and religious rhetoric are conveniently used as bogeys to scare the whole nation for an imminent takeover of fundamentalists. Could this be a cunning excuse to “call in the cavalry” to save the endangered nation, or a privileged position in the social hierarchy that is otherwise waning?

More seriously, can it be a coincidence that following the statements of the highest ranking public figures of this country (the president and the chief of the general staff), which warned us that the republic has never been in so much danger, the military refused to accept the results of a presidential elec-

tion that will end with an AKP member becoming the next president of the republic? Fortunately, the US government and the EU have both issued statements of support for the democratic process and cautioned the army to stay out of politics. Such a firm message should also be delivered privately to the General Staff.

There are other critical questions to be considered. The election laws, with their 10 percent election threshold, which leaves out 45 percent of the electorate and exaggerates the gains of the winner, was the doing of the Consultative Assembly, which was handpicked by the military junta after its 1980 coup. It is the same Assembly under the watchful eyes of the generals that laid out the procedures for electing the president of the republic and codified the Party Law that created satrapies rather than the democratic institutions, which would have been the midwife of a full fledged pluralist democracy. Now the same institution that has led to so much regime damage is rejecting the outcome of the laws of its own making. Ironically, those demonstrating on the streets look up to this institution as their savior to ward off anti-secular forces, which are made to believe threaten their lifestyles.

There are some fanatics and fundamentalist around who threaten people with their obscurantist deeds and rhetoric. But how big is this group? Moreover, who has put an end to elective religious training in the middle-level school system? Unfortunately it was the choice of the military to initiate obligatory religious education in junior and high schools as a bulwark against the growing leftist movement that was the bogey of the Cold War era. It is now the same institution that is complaining about encroachment of religion on the secular way of life.

The more conservative, parochial, and peripheral groups found their way to the political and economic center by AKP's (and its predecessors like Refah/Welfare Party's) success in government. By and large they found a voice and a place for themselves in the system. They used a different vocabulary and acted different. For those secularist demonstrators of middle and upper middle-class people, their political parties and leaders became dysfunctional and obsolete, and have failed. This time around the more modern urban classes feel that they are devoid of representation, leadership, and a political party or platform that can offer them a future they can believe in. That is why their protest misses the target, because the AKP is not the reason for their insecurity but merely the lucky winner of the system that the masses protest for not representing them and endangering their way of life. That is why the principal threat to democracy in Turkey comes not from the AKP but from its opponents.

Now we can expect the healing effect of the national elections. We can only hope that it will be accompanied by the election of the president by popular vote and under the guidance of a new constitution that will not allow extra-legal and extra-democratic forces to intervene in the will of the populace any more.



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