



Turkish Crisis

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Seven hundred thousand citizens of the Turkish Republic rallied in Istanbul Sunday. Two weeks ago, 300,000 participated in a similar demonstration. Marchers in the latest protest chanted, "neither sharia nor a coup, but real democracy." They and millions of their peers have found themselves beset by bad choices, and with no positive outcome in sight.

Commenting to foreigners, Turks tend to simplify their dilemma, posing it exclusively as a confrontation between radical Islam and secularism. The threat of the former is represented by Abdullah Gul, the chosen presidential candidate of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AK party (Justice and Development). Gul is currently the AK's foreign minister. Balloting for the presidency was to have taken place

May 9 but has now been called off by Turkey's supreme court, after complaints from secular opposition parties that the first round of voting (which takes place within parliament) violated rules calling for a two-thirds quorum.

Erdogan himself had been expected to run, but encountered so much protest from secularists that he chose Gul—who is hardly a unifying figure. Gul belonged to the Islamist government of Necmettin Erbakan, pushed out of power by the army in the "soft coup" of 1997, on the charge that he and his colleagues intended to undermine secularism and draw Turkey closer to Sunni Arab countries. Further, Gul's wife Hayrunisa wears a head-scarf, which would be her own business except that many Turks view it as a symbolic assertion that fundamen-

talists are better Muslims than their fellow Turks. The military had threatened to intervene against Gul.

Each of the opposing forces in the standoff--militarists and Islamists--uses the undeniable faults of the other to justify its position. Turkish entry into the European Union will never be consummated so long as the republic's army insists on its right to throw out elected governments. And more than 80 years of militarist secularism has left Turkey with a brutal soldier caste that has been accused of major human rights violations, along with a grossly corrupt police, and overall failure to fulfill the promises made to the Turkish citizenry in the name of modernity and progress.

It is unsurprising that people disappointed by life under a secular regime would be tempted to allow religious believers to govern, presuming they might rule with a higher sense of ethics. Something similar, but less troubling than the situation in Turkey, happened in Mexico in 2000 when the Institutional Revolutionary Party, for which secularism was long an official posture, was replaced by the historically-Catholic National Action Party.

But the AK party is clearly an Islamist, Sunni-preferential movement with questionable links in the global underworld of Muslim extremism. An Islamist Turkey is doubtless a worse choice than a militarist Turkey from the European and global perspective, although Europeans have called on the Turks to hold free

elections without any military meddling.

When one interviews ordinary Turks, as well as Kurds from Turkey, as I have recently done--that is, people who are neither lobbyists for the military nor for the Islamists--the Turkish dilemma seems to run much deeper than a conflict between secularism and religious radicalism. Both the secularists and the Islamists have execrable records on a more basic issue dividing Turkish society: the nature of Turkish identity.

Turkish citizens include ethnic Turks, Kurds, Armenians, Jews, Greeks, Arabs, and other minorities, professing Islam in differing forms, as well as various sects of Christianity, plus Judaism, and, for some, no religion.

The Turkish military and the Turkish Islamists are as one in their bigotry against the Alevi Shia community of 22 million--up to a third of the country--and in their insistence that Turks are almost entirely Sunnis. As noted by Irfan Bozan, author of a recent report on the religious situation issued by the influential Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, the willingness of the militant-Sunni AK party to accommodate the Alevi minority is the "acid test" of Erdogan's professed loyalty to secularism.

The Turkish military and the Turkish Islamists also agree in refusing to grant cultural autonomy to the Kurdish minority, which makes up a fifth of the population. And the

Turkish military and the Turkish Islamists unite in denial of the historical truth about the Armenians who were brutally massacred in Turkey during the first world war. Turkish militarism and Islamism both implicitly define good citizens as Turks and Sunnis by ethnicity and by heritage. But a forced, single nationality was always artificial and the attempt at institutionalizing it has manifestly failed.

Finally, the Turkish military and the Turkish Islamists agree in their current hostility to the U.S., especially over the status of Iraqi Kurdistan. Erdogan and Gul have threatened to obstruct the Kurdish assumption of control over the Iraqi city of Kirkuk -presumably by armed action. Anti-American propaganda of a particularly vicious kind has pullulated in Turkey and its communities abroad, focusing on alleged atrocities by U.S. troops in Iraq.

Turkish and Kurdish Alevis fear that as the power of secularism declines, the military will itself turn in a Sunni-extremist direction, given the need for a new unifying ideology. And they point out, paradoxically, one of the worst consequences of compulsory secularism: a long gap in quality religious education, which could combine with the Sunni exclusivity of AK to promote untrained, radical preachers in the mold of the fundamentalist and ultraviolent Saudi-Wahhabi cult, which inspires al Qaeda.

The Sunday marchers in Istanbul got it right. Between militarist secularism and radical Islam, most Turkish citizens would likely continue to take their chances with the army. But the country will not move forward until it adopts three indispensable principles of a real democracy: a non-political military, religious pluralism, and full equality for all minorities.