

PolicyWatch #1264 : Special Forum Report

Turkish Election Results: More or Less Stability?

Featuring [Soner Cagaptay](#) , Matthew Bryza, and Alan Makovsky
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On July 23, 2007, Soner Cagaptay, Matthew Bryza, and Alan Makovsky addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dr. Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. Mr. Bryza is deputy assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs. Mr. Makovsky is a senior staff member with the House Committee on International Relations.

SONER CAGAPTAY

The results of the July 22 election have short-, medium-, and longer-term implications for Turkey and its relations with the United States. For short-term political stability, the results are the best possible outcome. The AKP has emerged with a greatly increased share of the vote (47 percent) and a comfortable majority (340 seats in the 550-seat parliament). This gives it a mandate to form the government while forcing it to seek consensus to muster the 367 votes needed to elect a president.

Beyond the next few weeks, however, the picture is not so promising, with increasing internal division to blame. Coming from one of Turkey's major political currents -- the Milli Gorus (national outlook) movement of the Islamist Welfare Party -- the AKP has engulfed another major current: the center-right. Emboldened, the AKP now opposes two other currents in Turkish politics: nationalists and leftists. Judging from the election results, the country is split in the middle between a greatly strengthened AKP and the leftists and nationalists, who together received 37 percent of the vote.

A more alarming divide is the one emerging between secular and Muslim Turks. In the past, the opposite of "secular" in Turkey was "Islamist" -- a perception that benefited secularism but which is now disappearing. The AKP has cast this spring's botched presidential elections -- when secular Turks blocked the AKP-dominated legislature from nominating Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul -- as a case of secular forces opposing "a religious president." This image has replaced the secular-Islamist divide with a secular-Muslim divide. In turn, that has boosted support for the AKP on the Muslim side. In a winning development for the AKP, the long-lived coexistence of Islam and secularism in Turkey is coming apart. The elections were an identity referendum, and about half of the populace chose Muslim.

Interestingly, the AKP's vote tally has increased by 12 percent since the 2002 elections; according to a 2006 poll conducted by TESEV, an Istanbul-based think tank, the number of Turks who identify themselves as "Muslim only" increased by 10 percent over the same period. Should this new divide persist, secular Turks will become a marginal force. In a post-September 11 world, with U.S. policy working to prevent a clash of civilizations, the changes in Turkish identification have grave implications for the United States.

Washington should also be concerned that the AKP, despite benefiting from good ties with the United States on many levels, does not stand behind or explain these ties to a populace that has become predominantly anti-American. One way out of this conundrum would be for the AKP to heed the words of the medieval poet Rumi: "Act the way you are or be the way you act." That is, the AKP's public discourse should reflect Turkey's actual and positive relationship with the United States. Washington can help by taking adequate steps

to counter the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which continues to launch terrorist attacks in Turkey from northern Iraq -- the key issue driving anti-Americanism among Turks.

MATTHEW BRYZA

The fact that elections were held successfully despite all of the recent turmoil is a great achievement for democracy. Turkey is strategically important to the United States as a modern, secular democracy with a Muslim-majority population.

To preserve these important bilateral ties, the United States has an obligation to take concrete action against the PKK. The U.S. administration made this commitment in the Azores declaration prior to the Iraq war, when it pledged to prevent Iraq from becoming a haven for terrorists of any kind. Other problems in Iraq are overshadowing this commitment, however, and U.S.-Turkish relations have suffered as a result. But there is more at stake than the PKK's forays into Turkey, such as the potential for Kirkuk to dissolve into a conflict area.

From a regional perspective, Turkey is emerging as the connective tissue between the Caspian Sea and Europe. Today, Europe faces an issue much more serious than just getting Caspian oil; it must diversify its natural gas resources instead of relying on a single supplier. Only through good competition can countries regulate their relations with the Russian energy giant GAZPROM in a healthy way. Turkey stands right in the middle of these relations. Since its recently announced gas supply deal with Iran, the possibility of financial investment in Iran's gas sector is of great concern -- and would be in direct violation of UN Security Council resolutions.

Regarding Turkey's near-term political future, the United States hopes for a smooth and stable process in the country's upcoming presidential election, to be held in the parliament. The next president's term will last until 2014, and having a consensus candidate appears critical.

Finally, the "Armenian genocide resolution" currently before the U.S. Congress bears mentioning. In general, the conventional wisdom behind U.S. policy on such issues is that there are other ways besides legislation to approach events fraught with such enormous human consequences. The most moral and meaningful way forward on this issue is to facilitate a discussion among historians, sociologists, and philosophers from both sides.

ALAN MAKOVSKY

The election was revolutionary in that most Turks voted against the establishment in an apparent rebuke to the military. Indeed, the AKP has benefited from the military's April 27 warning regarding secularism -- a development reminiscent of the 1980s, when Gen. Kenan Evren delivered a pre-election speech warning Turks not to vote for Turgut Ozal, and Ozal went on to win 44 percent of the vote. Turks have a very high regard for the military as a political firewall, but they prefer that it stay in the barracks rather than step out onto the political stage.

Will the election results make the military less inclined to intervene? Probably not -- the military still holds itself responsible for the enduring life of the secular Turkish republic. The pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP), for one, does not seem to understand this steadfast republican stance. One DTP leader, Leyla Zana, recently stated that Turkey "need[s] to be divided up into provinces, one to [be] called Kurdistan." Such comments can only inflame Kurdish sentiment and lead to discord that undermines the republican aims held by the military and other actors.

Regarding the U.S.-Turkish relationship, I can say from personal experience that Turkey's credit in Congress has increased in recent years. There is greater appreciation of the country's strategic importance and its status as a secular, predominantly Muslim democracy. Ankara's rapprochement with Greece was influential in

swaying the Greek American lobby. In this regard, the AKP victory would seem to bode well. Prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's concessions on Cyprus still resonate, and his attitude of restraint regarding northern Iraq is worth noting. Certain moves, however -- such as calling Israel a "terrorist state," inviting Hamas officials to Ankara, befriendng Syria, and arranging a gas deal with Iran -- are worrisome. If the gas deal turns out to have an investment component in Iran, this would be a serious breach of U.S. trust.

Bilateral ties are still important to both sides, but less so for Turks now than in the past. U.S. leverage over Turkey has diminished. Iraq and related issues are the main problems in the relationship, and will probably remain so for some time. That the United States attacked a Muslim country has created great discontent in Turkey. Moreover, Erdogan and the AKP administration do not speak publicly in favor of U.S.-Turkish ties, despite the fact that Ankara cooperates with Washington in Afghanistan and Iraq.

As for the Armenian resolution, it is difficult to block the measure from a procedural standpoint because it has majority support in the House of Representatives. That said, the executive branch has many strategic arguments to make against its passage, especially Turkey's importance to the war in Iraq.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by H. Akin Unver.

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