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Turkey's Ongoing Political Crisis: Where Now?

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The political turmoil in Turkey prompted by the April 24 nomination by Justice and Development Party (AKP) leader and Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Abdullah Gul, the foreign minister, as his candidate for presidency is far from over. The actions of the leadership of the AKP, a party with its roots in Islamism, has prompted protests by secular Turks and public concern from the Turkish military, which Turkish laws define as being the guardian of the secular state. There will not be a new president until after parliamentary elections scheduled for July 22 -- the secular incumbent, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, will stay on in a caretaker role. Meanwhile, large anti-AKP demonstrations have taken place and more are planned.

This is perhaps the most significant political crisis in Turkey since 1979-80 when the then parliament failed to elect a president and, amid tension on the streets, the military intervened. How will the ongoing tensions evolve, and what are the stakes for the AKP and the secular opposition in this period?

Background

The problem around the presidential election is simple. First, the AKP received support from only one-third of voters in 2002 parliamentary elections, but a high threshold of 10 percent barred all but one secular party from being seated in the legislature, and the AKP obtained two-thirds of the seats. In the end, 47 percent of the votes cast failed to get representation in the current parliament. Erdogan wanted to use his party's resulting disproportionate parliamentary majority to elect the new president. Second, the AKP made its decision for the presidency, which the Turkish constitution defines as a nonpartisan post, without consultations with the society, the opposition, or a debate in the press.

Erdogan himself, once mooted as a presidential candidate, must have expected some controversy, but the subsequent nomination of Gul for the post still triggered a massive response from Turkish secularists. Millions of people have joined demonstrations to protest the AKP. On April 27, the military issued via its website a communiqué voicing support for secularism, and on May 1 the (secular) constitutional court annulled the first round of presidential elections on procedural grounds.

Majoritarian Malaise

Turkey has traditionally suffered from a "majoritarian malaise," with right-wing parties -- such as the National Front coalitions in the late 1970s -- interpreting their control of parliament as a popular mandate to ignore democratic checks and balances. The AKP has shown a similar attitude.

The AKP has exercised almost unchecked executive and legislative power since the 2002 elections. The party's attempt to appoint one of its own leaders to the presidency would have completed its dominance of the executive and legislative branches and also put control of the judiciary within grasp. Parliament elects the president, whose few powers include the appointment of judges to the high courts.

Since taking power, the AKP has been unwilling to recognize the secular courts. On November 16, 2005, for

instance, in a rebuke to the judiciary (and Turkey's European orientation), Erdogan lambasted a European Court of Human Rights decision upholding Turkey's ban on turbans (a specific headscarf that the courts regard as a sign of political Islam), saying that jurisdiction on this issue "lies not with the courts but with the *ulama*" (Sunni Muslim clerics).

In addition to attacking the legitimacy of the judiciary, the AKP has set its sights on its critics in the press, exerting political and economic pressure on Turkey's media-owning businesses to influence press coverage in favor of the ruling party's policies. On April 14, for instance, when 400,000 Turks gathered in Ankara to protest the AKP, the two major news networks, which would usually broadcast large public demonstrations live ignored the event, one showing a documentary about Castro, the other showing a car race.

Secular Backlash

The growing sense of outrage by secular Turks prompted an April 14 march by about 400,000 people to the mausoleum of Ataturk, the founder of the modern secular state, in Ankara. Then on April 29, more than 1.2 million people gathered in Istanbul. The demonstrations have spread to other cities. New rallies are scheduled in Izmir and in Duisburg, Germany, where there is a large Turkish community. These rallies are likely to be watershed events -- Izmir is a staunchly secular city, so the rally in this town could be the largest anti-AKP gathering yet. The Duisburg rally in Germany will put the AKP issue on Europe's radar screen.

Some international media has characterized the anti-AKP rallies as a reaction of merely a secular elite. Yet, an analysis of the demonstrations shows its sentiments are wider:

- Far from being elite affairs, the demonstrations are massive gatherings attended by millions of people.
- Women dominate these rallies. According to press reports, for instance, women constituted the majority of the 1.2 million demonstrators in Istanbul. Moreover, all nine members of the committee coordinating the demonstrations are women. Turkish women will continue to play a central role in anti-AKP rallies; women have been the leading beneficiaries of Turkish secularism and have the most to lose from the AKP's consolidation of power.
- Middle-class Turks are also prominent in the demonstrations. Political parties representing middle-class Turks are, for the most part, not represented in the current parliament due to the 10 percent threshold. The demonstrations provide middle-class Turks with a political voice against the AKP they have not had in the last five years.

The Future

Since the beginning of the rallies, the media has grown more critical of the AKP than it has been since 2002, and the secular parties are now uniting. The AKP, though, seems determined to fight against its secular opponents. Using its existing overwhelming majority, the party is pushing for a constitutional amendment to change the required quorum of two-thirds of the deputies for votes on constitutional amendment and presidential elections. If the AKP has its way, after the July 22 elections, Turkey could have an amended constitution requiring only one-third of the deputies to be present to change the constitution or elect a president.

Given the AKP's domination of the parliament, President Sezer can only stop this amendment by submitting it to a referendum. But such a step would only complicate the political situation. The amendment is part of a package that, among other things, stipulates that the president be elected by popular vote. In event of a constitutional referendum, the AKP would position itself as the party fighting for the will of the people. This development would build support for the AKP, but also further polarize Turkey along the lines of AKP/Islamist versus secular, or "will of the people" versus "elites" as cast by the AKP.

Turkey has elected four presidents since adopting the current constitution in 1982. This is the first time since that a parliament has failed to elect a president. As Turkey faces more anti-AKP political rallies, the military's April 30 declaration could be seen as analogous to a now forgotten warning issued by the military on December 27, 1979. At the time, the government failed to elect a president in the midst of simmering political tensions, street demonstrations gripped the nation, and the crisis culminated in the coup of September 1980.

Challenge for Secular Opposition

Judging the AKP's pro-business stance in managing the Turkish economy, some analysts praise the AKP for being a liberal party. Through its disproportionately large parliamentary majority, the AKP is ignoring the need for maintaining a democratic consensus in Turkish society. Statistically speaking, in a four-party parliament, the AKP would not obtain a majority of the seats, even if it were the strongest party in the elections. In a three-party parliament, the AKP's chances to obtain a majority of seats would depend on the electoral performance of the others. An early challenge for the AKP is the liberal, secular opposition, which is reorganizing and uniting -- so far two on the center-right and two on the center-left have formed alliances. This means the 10 percent threshold of votes to gain seats is less likely to shut them out of parliament this time, and the checks and balances of Turkish democracy will be restored.

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