TURKEY

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In Search of National Consensus and a New Political Center

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Last October 29, the Republic of Turkey celebrated its 75th anniversary with an impressive show of republican sentiment and national pride. In streets and public places hung with hundreds of thousands of Turkish national colors and adorned with pictures of Kemal Atatürk, the "father of modern Turkey," flag-waving crowds in Turkey's large cities celebrated by chanting Kemalist slogans. The clear impression was of a united and stable country that has successfully negotiated a comprehensive social and political modernization.

Political developments of the past decade in and around Turkey, however, reveal a different picture. At home, the political center has weakened in the face of political movements, especially political Islam and the Kurdish question, that challenge the Kemalist model of a secular republic and the unitary nation and state. As the erosion of the traditional Western-oriented political center has accelerated, more extreme views have been established on the political scene. In Turkey's parliamentary elections of April 18, parties such as the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party, the Islamist Virtue Party, and the pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party gathered a combined vote of almost 40 percent. The moderate parties of the center-right and center-left that once won about 75 percent of the electorate took only about 57 percent of the national vote. The continuous growth of the Islamist forces and Kurdish insurgency has made the military increasingly influential in Turkish politics: national stability now comes at some significant cost to Turkish democracy.

Externally, the international sea change following the end of the Cold War also vastly changed the country's foreign and security policy environment, weakening Ankara's bonds with its Western allies and stimulating Turkish assertiveness in relations with neighboring countries. As a result, Turkey's foreign policy is undergoing tentative change on two fronts. First, Turkey is seeking a new balance between cooperative engagements in multinational frameworks and the more or less single-handed pursuit of national interests on the basis of a greatly enhanced, and still growing, military capability. Second, Turkey's political establishment is increasingly on the lookout for new foreign policy horizons beyond the country's traditional exclusive orientation toward the West and its European institutions. Turkey is not severing but redefining its relations with its Western allies, while reaching out for a broader Eurasian role as well.

Turkey's foreign policy orientation is of considerable importance for its American and European partners. Turkey plays a significant part in developing the energy resources of the Caspian Sea region. Turkey's contribution to containing Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq,

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as well as its strategic cooperation with Israel, are important for the future of the Middle East. Ankara is promoting cooperation in the Black Sea area and is supporting the Newly Independent States of Central Asia in their drive for national consolidation and independence. Peace and stability in the eastern Mediterranean depend on Turkey's readiness to solve its longstanding disputes with Greece and to help solve the Cyprus problem. Turkey's developing relations with various Balkan states are key to establishing cooperative structures in that region. Finally, the construction of a new European security architecture depends on Turkey's support for NATO's enlargement and restructuring. All these issues are of great strategic importance to the core countries of the Atlantic Alliance, and Turkey's development cannot be ignored or neglected by its Western partners.

Erosion of the Political Center

Because of the weakening of Turkey's political center and the growth of extreme factions, no party has gained a political majority since 1991. Governments have had to be based on generally short-lived, weak coalitions—often between ideologically opposed parties because the bitter personal rivalry between ideologically related leaders makes coupling parties from the same "family" almost impossible. Domestic politics has thus degenerated into a mere power struggle dominated by short-term tactical considerations. Political corruption has increased, as have ties between leading politicians and organized crime.

Meanwhile, pressing problems resulting from rapid economic and social change over the past 15 years have festered. Uncontrolled urbanization, growing income disparities between different population groups and between different regions of the country, the bankruptcy of the national systems of social security and health care, the steady decline of the educational system—all have gone almost unchecked. Persistent high inflation—at least 60 percent annually during the 1990s, with temporary peaks above 100 percent—has gnawed away large portions of the personal wealth of Turkey's masses. Not surprisingly, growing portions of the population have lost confidence in the established political elites and parties.

The Revival of Political Islam

Amidst the social disarray, radical political forces, both nationalist and Islamist, have gained prominence. Political Islam, represented by the Welfare Party of Necmettin Erbakan, made deep inroads among the impoverished urban masses in the squatter town areas of western Turkey's urban agglomerations. The party offered its services based on a political conception more in line with the traditional Turkish world view than the official Kemalist ideology as represented by the political parties of the center. At the same time, a new type of Islamists, exemplified by the former mayor of Greater Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdogan—urban, well-educated, modern—enhanced the party's attractiveness among the urban middle classes and the younger generation.

The rise of political Islam posed a severe challenge to the established Kemalist state elite, especially the military leadership and the upper echelons of the state bureaucracy and the judiciary. In June 1997, military-instigated political pressure ousted Erbakan from the prime ministry he had gained in a coalition government forged with Tansu Çiller's True Path Party. In February 1998, the Welfare Party was closed down by the Constitutional Court, and Erbakan was banned from politics for five years. The Virtue Party, successor to the Welfare Party, is also facing a politically-inspired closure procedure in the Constitutional Court, and at the same time its leading representatives have been charged with various crimes.

Nevertheless, as the April elections show, the Islamists remain a political force in Turkey, albeit on a somewhat reduced level. They are still strong at the local level and cannot be eradicated by legal and administrative means. Even if the Virtue Party is shut down, Islamists will continue to attract a considerable part of Turkey's population. Until the so-called secular political forces of the center regroup and regain their lost credibility with the masses, the military is fighting an uphill struggle against political Islam.

The Perennial Kurdish Question

A second serious challenge to the established Kemalist state tradition, the Kurdish quest for recognition as a distinct ethnic group with special rights, has also increased involvement of the military in Turkish politics during the past decade. The armed struggle—"separatist terrorism," as it is known in official Turkish language—of the Kurdistan Workers Party, the PKK, against the Turkish state is but another round, albeit the longest and most violent so far, in the decades-old Kurdish effort to gain acceptance of their distinct ethno-national identity by the Turkish state.

The past 15 years of fighting have cost the lives of some 30,000 people, about two-thirds of them PKK fighters, but also 4,200 Turkish soldiers and 5,300 civilians, Turks and Kurds. An especially dark side of this picture is the so-called extra-legal executions and other murders of mostly PKK sympathizers and other representatives of Kurdish interests such as lawyers, journalists, and politicians. According to a January 1998 report of a parliamentary commission, some 3,200 villages and hamlets in the Kurdish provinces have been destroyed either by state authorities or by PKK guerrillas. About 380,000 inhabitants were forced to migrate to regional centers like Diyarbakir, and many more people left the area because their livelihoods had been destroyed. It is estimated that up to 3 million people migrated from the Kurdish region to the urban centers in western and southern Anatolia to escape the devastation.

As with the Islamists, however, the state did not eliminate the Kurdish security problem. To the contrary, the militarization of public life in the southeast and the heavy repression of all forms of explicit Kurdishness furthered the growth of national consciousness among Turkey's Kurdish population. Today far more Turkish citizens of Kurdish ori-

gin support some form of cultural and political autonomy for the Kurds than in 1984, when the PKK started its activities. The pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party won the April elections with a convincing plurality of votes in 11 central Kurdish provinces although it was unable to gain any seats in parliament because it failed the nationwide 10 percent electoral threshold. The capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan last February and his likely sentencing to death will not end the Kurdish question. Nor, probably, would a total victory of the Turkish army over the PKK finish Kurdish aspirations for recognition. The only answer is for the Turkish state to switch to a nonmilitary, nonrepressive approach to the issue and to work for a democratic solution of the Kurdish question.

Curtailing Turkish Democracy

A democratic solution to these problems, however, may be too much to expect of Turkish democracy today. The military-led defense of the Kemalist system against its Islamist and Kurdish challengers has severely curtailed the democratic freedoms and civil rights of all Turkish people, as annual U.S. State Department reports on human rights in Turkey make clear. Even nonviolent expressions of opinions that deviate from the official state ideology of the unitary, secular Kemalist republic and its indivisible nation run the risk of prosecution by state authorities—as witnessed by the recurrent closing down of Islamist and Kurdish political parties and the widespread persecution and jailing of journalists, intellectuals, and even politicians for crimes of conviction. The consequent silencing of all moderate spokesmen for Islamist and Kurdish interests may well radicalize dissenting groups, making a democratic political solution of the issues even more difficult in the future.

Over the past 10 years, Turkey's military leadership has consolidated its role as guardian of the established Kemalist system and has become a political actor in its own right—though, in sharp distinction to all other NATO member states, a political actor that evades effective democratic parliamentary control. The defense of the Kemalist system, besides its ideological aspect, is also a struggle for power between the established state elites and rival elite groups with a different political and social background—political Islam and Kurdish nationalism. Widening the legitimate political spectrum of Turkish democracy to include nonradical Islamist and nonviolent Kurdish groups would therefore imply the sharing of power and its benefits among a larger number of potential contenders—a development especially hard to accept for a military leadership that has gotten accustomed to its privileged position.

Public criticism of the deficiencies of Turkish democracy is growing, but slowly. The tremendous economic, social, and political development in Turkey since the foundation of the republic has nurtured civil society, as well as public awareness of the undemocratic features of Turkey's political system. But proponents of more liberal democracy—representatives of Turkey's big business, some of the country's leading journalists, the vocal human rights organizations—have as yet had only a limited impact on political developments, as most political parties seem reluctant to adopt suggestions from civil society groups, and the military leadership is immune to such outside influences.

Challenges to Western Policy

In shaping relations with Ankara, Turkey's Western allies and partners must take into account the country's fragile domestic situation, its unsettled societal and political cleavages. Turkey clearly has a potentially critical role in shaping the future of a region of critical international importance. But to play that role most constructively, Turkey must first address its domestic political problems. Turkey's increasing opening up to the outside world since the mid-1980s must be complemented by a more open and democratic pluralist society at home. One promising strategy would be to forge a "reform alliance" between the severely diminished political center and the most prominent groups of civil society. Such a strategy, however, would require Turkey's social democrats and the parties of the center-right to remember their progressive political roots and reshape their parties—and their leaders—accordingly.

Turkey's Western allies can do little to directly support such a development from the outside. They should, however, make unmistakably clear that they want Turkey to remain firmly inside the Euro-Atlantic political fold, and they should openly support those forces in Turkey who share this view. European and American partners should also continue to stress the values that characterize the Euro-Atlantic system as they have again been confirmed by the NATO summit in Washington and remind Turkish leaders that their country still has some way to go to meet these requirements in full. European and American political leaders should engage in a confidential dialogue to develop a common policy for anchoring Turkey more firmly in the Euro-Atlantic system.

Turkey's European partners should also more openly and seriously take into account Ankara's sensitivities with regard to developing a new European security architecture. Discussions about a more prominent European role in security and defense should explicitly assign Turkey a place in such schemes even if the country will not become a member of the European Union in the foreseeable future. What is needed is a "European strategy" for Turkey that goes beyond the narrow frame of EU-Turkey relations and includes economic, political, and security aspects of Turkey's role in and for Europe.

The United States, too, should develop a more comprehensive and consistent policy toward Turkey. Close cooperation with Ankara about the future of the Kurdish question in Turkey and in the region as a whole would help diminish the widespread feeling among Turkish leaders that Washington regards Turkey primarily as an instrument for realizing crucial American strategic interests in the region. A permanent high-level American-Turkish political dialogue on developments in the "greater Middle East" would also help ease much of Turkey's feeling of not always being consulted properly with respect to American policy that also affects crucial Turkish national interests. ■