

Turkey's Future

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Turkey can continue its economic rise and become a regional power so long as it remains a democracy.

Turkey is often bent and torn by its deep societal fault lines. Philosophical divides enflame secularists and Islamists, and political divides pit supporters against opponents of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP). Adding to the broil, ethnic divides lead to violent clashes between the Kurds and the Turkish state.

Despite these many cleavages, simple arithmetic suggests Turkey has what it takes to thrive as a democracy.

None of Turkey's disparate halves is large enough to dominate the others. Demographically and politically, these blocks are destined to counter-balance each other, and find a modus vivendi.

There is simply no other option. This is not to say there will come a day when Turkish and Kurdish nationalists embrace each other, or that secularists and Islamists will encourage their kids to intermarry. Rather, the counter-balancing nature of Turkey's social and political blocks -- layered with six decades of democratic traditions -- suggests that eventually all these groups will have no other choice but to resolve to just let the others be.

In this regard, Turkey might be blessed when compared to its southern neighbors, who are witnessing the rise of dominant Islamist movements. No single constituency in Turkey is powerful enough to sweep the others aside, while free and fair elections will ensure that the country's disparate blocks will continue to thrive.

Take for example, Turkey's marginal Islamist and secularist camps. Islamists (those who want to impose Sharia law, which does not include all Muslims) total around 15 percent of the population. At the same time, Secularists (those who oppose any religion in public life at any time, which does not include all those who are secular) also compose a similarly sized block. So, Turkey has around 10 million Islamists and 10 million Secularists, guaranteeing that the country will never be Islamist or secularist, unless one group violently takes over the government. This is a highly implausible scenario -- unlike the French, the Turks do not do revolutions.

In parallel to the split over religion, there is a deep political split between the supporters and opponents of the

staunchly conservative AKP that currently holds the majority in parliament. In the most recent 2011 elections, the AKP received 49.5 percent of the vote. Opinion polls suggest that the AKP could increase its support in the forthcoming 2014 elections to 55 percent. Yet, polls also show that between 32 and 38 percent of Turks (upward of 25 million people) would never support the AKP, and categorically refuse to live in a country shaped solely by its values and politics.

Finally, there is the divide between Turkish and Kurdish nationalists. An overwhelming majority of Turkey's inhabitants are dye-in-the-wool Turkish nationalists. But among the Kurds, who constitute around 10 to 15 percent of the population, Kurdish nationalism is a potent force. Because Kurdish nationalism is deeply politicized in Turkey, it cannot be extinguished. This partly explains why Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently entered peace talks with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the flag-bearer of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey: Mr. Erdogan has conceded that Kurdish nationalism is here to stay.

Considering this political and demographic makeup, Turkey's future is bound to look something like this: Secularist and Islamists Turks will remain confined to their political ghettos, holding their ground, but lacking the ability to shape mainstream politics. Secular and conservative Turks will grudgingly find a way to live together, shaping Turkey's future together. This will happen as Turkish nationalists reluctantly yield to some demands from the Kurdish nationalists. For their part, Kurdish nationalists will tacitly accept that their demand for turning Turkey into a bi-national state is a pipe dream.

In other words, so long as it remains a democracy, Turkey will be fine.

Ankara wants to become a Middle East power, a goal that the U.S. and Europe have many good strategic reasons for supporting. But expect Turkey's allies to treat Ankara as a regional leader only if Turkey leads with its values as well, enshrining gender equality, freedom of expression, and religious freedoms in its new constitution.

Turkey's democratic heritage will help it rise in the Middle East, while allowing the country's disparate halves to learn to live together.

Soner Cagaptay, author of the forthcoming book The Rise of Turkey: The 21st Century's First Muslim Power, is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ♦

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