

Ankara's Quiet Revolution

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Articles & Testimony

Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) must be delighted by the recent turn of events. On March 31, the nation's constitutional court agreed to review a case urging that the party be banned for allegedly violating Turkey's secular Constitution, throwing the country into a period of enormous instability. But while the outcome of the case is far from clear, the AKP, win or lose, will become stronger through the process. Indeed, amid the turmoil, the only real certainty is that the Turkish political environment, polarized along secular-Muslim lines since 2007, will shift to further strengthen the AKP.

The AKP's initial strength lay in its commitment to pursuing a pluralist democracy and pushing for European Union accession. Following its rise to power in 2002, the AKP pursued a policy of consensual politics, making alliances with liberals, the media and the powerful business lobby on European Union accession and other issues. Yet once formal accession talks with the EU began in 2005, the AKP stopped aggressively pursuing the issue. At the same time, it began to position itself as something of a political underdog. In the spring of 2007, the constitutional court intervened to block the AKP from electing Abdullah Gul, then the country's foreign minister, to the presidency. The AKP cast the court's political move as an attempt to block "popular will" and the election of "a religious man" to the presidency. The ensuing polarization along secular-versus-Muslim lines garnered massive public support and the AKP then scored a monumental victory, winning nearly half the vote in July 2007 parliamentary elections.

By August, its efforts to elect Gul prevailed, and the AKP relished its growing support base -- while losing its appetite for consensual politics. Since late 2007 the new party seems to have taken a liking to a majoritarian view of democracy, ignoring checks and balances and dismissing alliances with the non-AKP groups. For instance, in February 2008, it passed legislation to permit the wearing of Islamic-style headscarves on college campuses, effectively deciding Turkey's most divisive political issue after only three weeks of debate. Moreover, the party has been drafting a new constitution for the past eight months without public input.

The post-2007 AKP is confident, and with good reason. The party's power extends beyond the branches of government. Turkish journalists suggest, and U.S. officials confirm, that the pro-AKP share in the Turkish media market might be about 50 percent, up from a marginal share only a few years ago. Although the party has relatively weak support among large businesses, that base, too, is growing with the rise of new names linked to the AKP. The court's decision last month further consolidated support for the party while solidifying its majoritarian tendencies. If the court were to ban the AKP outright, it would only strengthen public support for the party further by mobilizing its exclusive brand -- "a religious party representing the popular will." Indeed, the AKP leadership is already advancing these themes. On March 15, AKP leader and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan attacked the prosecutor's case by citing the Qur'an's Araf sura, which states that people who refuse to acknowledge religion "are like cattle." The following day, he argued that the indictment was against the popular will.

To avoid bolstering support for the AKP, the court may pass a less drastic verdict than a ban. One possibility would be that it would focus instead on banning certain individuals or withholding financial aid from the Turkish treasury. But even such a "yellow card" would strengthen the party. It would be seen as a move against religiosity and the

popular will, both of which give the AKP its bulldozer-like force in Turkish politics and play to the party's promotion of itself as the underdog.

The Turkish courts have not played their hand well, but to function, the Turkish democracy still needs a judiciary. But the AKP's power -- including its ability to counterbalance any court action -- has politically emasculated the secular judiciary. Consequently, the party's next steps will actually be more important than the court's. Under similar circumstances a decade ago, the court shut down the AKP's predecessor, the Islamist Welfare Party (RP), and some RP members felt compelled to moderate and eschew public Islamism. These individuals eventually created the AKP. But it is not certain whether the court's current action will have a similar effect and encourage the AKP to return to the pluralist and consensual politics it practiced from 2002 to 2007.

All this suggests that Turkey is going through a quiet revolution. While a ban against the AKP is an undesirable outcome for a democracy, the alternative might not be more favorable. In addition to its influence over the media and its emerging support base in the business community, the AKP fully controls the legislative and executive branches. Moreover, the party now has the ability to mobilize a public image that trumps the judiciary, and a chance to rule Turkey with majority public support, unrestrained by checks and balances. The courts may decide soon about the party's fate, but the jury remains out on the future of Turkish democracy.

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