

# Turkish Secularism Is Withering

Aug 26, 2007



Articles & Testimony

**T**his fall, I plan to teach a course on Turkish secularism at Georgetown University. The class was originally listed as current politics. But given the direction in which Turkey's headed, it could well become a history course instead. For after some 80 years, Turkish secularism is withering away.

In late July, the ruling Justice and Development Party (known in Turkish as the AKP) won 47 percent of the vote in parliamentary elections, strengthening its already commanding position. Now the AKP, a party with an Islamist pedigree, seems set to elect its foreign minister, Abdullah Gul, as president. Once marginal, Turkey's Islamists have become mainstream, and the consequences could prove enormous.

To understand the stakes, it helps to grasp the particular nature of Turkish secularism. When Kemal Ataturk founded Turkey as a secular republic after World War I, he looked to Europe for his model, especially France. Whereas U.S. secularism provides freedom of religion, the French version that Ataturk adopted, known as *laïcité*, emphasizes freedom from religion -- that is, keeping mosque out of politics.

*Laïcité* proved quite durable in Turkey -- somewhat surprising given its conservative Muslim character. But the role of religion there was always complex. On questions of Islam, Turks fall into three camps: a minority of irreligious liberals; a minority of fundamentalist Muslims; and a vast majority of conservative Muslims, who practice Islam at home but don't want to live in a Sharia state. After Turkey became a multiparty democracy in 1946, secular parties forged a lasting alliance between liberals and conservative Muslims (and the military), marginalizing and demonizing the fundamentalists.

The AKP, which rose to power in 2002, challenged this old arrangement. It provided better governance and higher economic growth than its secular predecessors, showing that devout politicians could also be good managers. Second, after a few early stumbles, it pursued a pro-business and pragmatic foreign policy. And the AKP tried hard to shed its Islamist image, repositioning itself as a mainstream -- albeit conservative -- movement. Then came the events of April and May, which helped the already popular AKP increase its standing. The AKP attempted to get Parliament to elect Gul as president -- a post seen as the bastion of Turkish secularism. Secularists boycotted the vote, millions of liberal Turks took to the streets, the military warned darkly against a Gul presidency, and the constitutional court ultimately blocked his accession.

Conspicuously absent from these proceedings were Turkey's conservative masses. The AKP sought to convince them that secular forces had unfairly blocked a candidate who just happened to be religious. Suddenly, the traditional split in Turkish politics was transformed from a secular-fundamentalist divide to a secular-Muslim one. The secularists were cut off from their traditional allies, and conservatives flocked to the AKP in droves. This realignment has left the secular parties enfeebled. Ataturk's own Republican People's Party (CHP), for example, got less than half the AKP's tally in the recent election.

Where does this leave Turkey? It all depends on whether the secularists can figure out a way to reinvigorate *laïcité* and attract conservative Muslims. The secular parties must also overcome internal divisions and improve their

management credentials. And they must tackle the public's increasing anti-Western sentiments. Should they fail, the consequences could be devastating. The Turkish military, which sees itself as the guardian of Ataturk's legacy, is unlikely to tolerate the unraveling of Turkish secularism. While it has intervened before, it has never done so in opposition to strong public opinion. If it did so now, it would only deepen the rifts in Turkish society and strengthen the AKP.

The AKP is unlikely to end Turkish secularism overnight. Gradually, however, religion will assume a larger and larger place in the country's politics and society. Turkey will become a more Islamic society in its foreign-policy outlook and culture. Anti-Western sentiments will grow. Headscarves, religious education and the rejection of alcohol will become more common. The Turkey of old will slowly disappear, leaving in its place a profoundly different -- and potentially much more unstable -- nation. ❖

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