

Turkey's 'Smart' Islamist Challenge

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Brief Analysis

On May 20, thousands of secular Turks demonstrated in the Black Sea port city of Samsun against the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has an Islamist pedigree. It was the most recent display of protest in a power struggle between the AKP and its opponents over determining a replacement for outgoing president Ahmet Necdet Sezer. In addition to the protestors and Sezer, the courts and the Turkish military have weighed in against the AKP. Far from backing down, as Turkey's Islamists would have done in the past, the AKP has stepped up the pressure by introducing a constitutional amendment package that calls for direct presidential elections to replace the current system of voting in parliament. President Sezer could decide the fate of this package, but the political crisis will continue.

Secular Protests, Constitutional Dilemmas

Secular demonstrations first broke out soon after the AKP government nominated Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul as a presidential candidate on April 24. Secular opposition parties then boycotted the presidential voting process in parliament, creating a political deadlock. On May 1, the Turkish constitutional court annulled the first round of presidential elections. The political deadlock has led the AKP to call for early parliamentary elections -- previously scheduled for November -- on July 22.

When the AKP's predecessor, the Welfare Party (RP), was challenged by a secular campaign in 1996â€“1997, it left office. The AKP has remained stalwart, however, passing the constitutional amendments. In addition, Gul has announced that he will continue his candidacy. Turkey's Islamists seem to have come a long way since then, becoming emboldened and politically savvy. The proposed amendment contains two important articles: (1) instead of the president being elected by the parliament, it calls for the president to be directly chosen by the entire electorate to a five-year term, with the chance of being reelected; (2) it aims to lower the quorum for certain parliamentary sessions, such as those for constitutional amendments, from a two-thirds to one-third majority.

The demonstration in Samsun -- significant as the city where Turkey's secular founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, launched the country's war of independence against occupying powers following World War I -- comes just before President Sezer's impending May 25 decision on the amendment package. According to the Turkish constitution, amendments need the approval of the president to become law. President Sezer received the bill from parliament on May 11 and has two weeks to review it, at which point he can either sign it or send it back to parliament for review. If

he sends it back and parliament readopts it, he will then have to either sign it or refer all or some of its contents to a national referendum.

President Sezer and the constitutional court are in a precarious position. If they vote against the package, they face the possibility of public backlash. The politically astute AKP has cast the package as a chance for the Turkish people to directly elect their president -- a very popular position in any democracy. In this regard, most Turks would interpret President Sezer's attempt to block the amendment as the work of the "elite" challenging "popular" will. The same criticism would be leveled against Turkey's secular parties if they stand against the amendment.

The AKP's 'Smart' Approach

Even though the AKP was not voted in by a majority of the Turkish populace, it has held a legislative majority for the past five years. In the 2002 elections, the party received support from just one-third of the populace, but a 10-percent election threshold allocated the seats of smaller parties to the AKP, giving it its legislative majority. The AKP had hoped to use this majority to elect Gul. Now that this strategy has faltered, the AKP perhaps wants to build a real popular majority. With the passing of the constitutional amendments package in parliament, for example, the AKP has cast itself in the role of the party representing the will of the people. Indeed, the party would benefit from any efforts to block the amendment package, since a referendum would be the most likely result. In the July parliamentary elections, the AKP could also transfer public support for the amendment into support for itself.

Indeed, by sending the amendment package to President Sezer, the AKP demonstrated that, unlike the RP in the 1990s, it feels emboldened to take on Turkish secularism. The AKP's confidence is rooted in the lesson it has accurately drawn from 1997, when secular Turks -- political parties, the military, the courts, the business community, and the media -- forced the RP from power: namely, that backing from the business sector and media, as well as steady popular support, is critical to surviving a secular onslaught. The party's pro-business policies, along with the support of the Turkish media (which is mainly owned by large Istanbul businesses), have helped the AKP achieve some of its popular support, at least for the time being.

The AKP's Image Problem

Given the size of the recent anti-AKP rallies, some analysts have wondered why the AKP has not launched rallies of its own. Herein lies the AKP's image dilemma. While the secular rallies covered widely in the international media look similar to protests held in any European city, such as Rome or Lisbon, rallies in which the AKP's core Islamist constituents participate would look more like Ayatollah Khomeini's Tehran. Through its pro-business policies, the AKP has painstakingly created a Western image to show Europe and the United States, but large AKP rallies could easily shatter this façade.

Likely Secular Response

The best gambit for the secular forces would be to not oppose the direct presidential elections amendment. In this regard, Sezer's best bet would be to avoid a referendum and sign the amendment package. This would allow it to become law, at which stage Sezer could take its components, such as the clause that lowers the parliamentary quorum from two-thirds to one-third, to the constitutional court. The court could then scrutinize the quorum clause -- an important potential tool for the AKP, assuming the party has a strong showing in the July parliamentary elections. (Such an outcome looks likely, but most Turkish opinion polls are notoriously unreliable.)

On May 7 and 8, respectively, the Association of Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen (TUSIAD) -- a powerful Istanbul-based lobby -- and the European Union (EU) stated that the constitutional amendments should be considered by a new parliament. TUSIAD has been supportive of the idea of a single-party government as a means of economic and political stability; hence, it has generally not taken issue with the AKP. Similarly, the EU has voiced positive opinions of the AKP. In the constitutional amendments debate, however, secular Turks, President Sezer, and

the courts could gain TUSIAD and the EU as allies.

Conclusion

Can the AKP sustain its latest strategy? Assuming that its apparent tactic of political polarization works, other variables could have an impact on the party's public support. For instance, terrorist attacks by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) would hurt the AKP significantly. Alternatively, the party's popularity would be boosted if the United States pressured Iraqi Kurds to extradite into Turkish custody those PKK leaders currently based in northern Iraq. Turkish media reports suggest that U.S. action against the PKK could be forthcoming, though it is not clear whether this action would include the handing over of PKK leaders -- or whether such a handover would be to the AKP or to the Turkish military, which is tasked by Turkish law as the guardian of the country's secular constitution. Since adopting its current constitution in 1982, Turkey has elected four presidents. Its recent failure to elect a new president could become the country's worst political crisis of the past two decades.

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