



**Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman**

**June 7, 2007**

## **Turkey's Political Crisis**

**Yossi Eli**

Contemporary Turkey poses a paradox. Its political system is in turmoil and its political future seems to be uncertain at best. At the same time, the Turkish economy is booming. In that regard, coincidentally, the situation resembles that in Israel

Prior to the current political crisis, the government in Ankara had cause for optimism. Negotiations with the European Union were progressing on the right track, however slowly and notwithstanding certain pitfalls. There was a surge of foreign investments in recent years and the economy, the most important factor influencing the Turkish electorate's behavior, performed surprisingly well. A strong currency (the YTL value against the US dollar and the Euro is roughly the same as it was four years ago), relatively low inflation (single digit for the last three years) and strong growth rates (between 7% and 10% annually) almost tripled the country's per capita income level, bringing it to a level slightly higher than that of Romania, an EU member state. Reforms on the political, social and economic levels, as troublesome as their implementation might be, were proceeding in accordance with EU accession requirements. The public mood was characterized by a growing sense of confidence and optimism, with change and rejuvenation in the air. As a result, although the current government did not fulfill all of its promises, polls predicted another victory for the ruling Islamist-oriented Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the next elections. Yet suddenly, huge anti-government demonstrations erupted in the streets of Turkey's major cities. What had happened?

What began in April with the AKP's tendering of Foreign Minister Dr. Abdullah Gül's candidacy to the post of president, to be elected by parliament, as a replacement for outgoing President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, quickly led to a political meltdown. On April, 27, Gül won 357 votes out of 361 members of parliament present, while the other 180 members boycotted the vote. Legally, a winning candidate is required to attain the votes of 2/3rds of the members of parliament, which Gül had fallen just short of, thanks to the boycott. Hence, the Republican People's party (CHP) filed a claim against the validity of Gül's election to the constitutional court. On May 1, 2007, the court ruled in favor of the CHP's petition and nullified the results of the elections. In a repeat first round vote on May

6, Gül again did not receive the required 2/3rds majority, and he withdrew his candidacy. With parliament unable to elect a president, it dissolved itself, as required by law, and set July 22 as the date for general elections.

The public was hardly passive to these political maneuvers. On April 14, just prior to the much-expected declaration of Gül's candidacy, a mass rally was organized in Ankara against it, giving life to a heretofore ineffective political opposition and generating renewed political involvement among disaffected citizens. The initial 300,000-strong rally in Ankara was replicated in Istanbul on April 29 and Izmir on May, 12. The color red was the main feature of these rallies, with people waving Turkish flags and chanting "Turkey is secular and will stay that way". Adding to this popular pressure was the stance of the military leadership, which indicated that it would not stand idly by in the face of any alteration of Turkey's status as a secular state. Hence, at the moment, Turkey is approaching parliamentary elections in a state of profound uncertainty.

To be sure, this kind of political crisis is hardly new. In fact, it has happened four times since 1991. These periodic bouts of political instability are generally characterized by the formation of new alliances among political parties, the loss of public confidence in the parties' and country's existing leadership, and an overall stock-taking regarding the future. The current political opposition comprises two major alliances, one in the secular right (DP – Democrat Party) and one in the left (under the umbrella of the CHP) alongside the nationalist (MHP – National Action Party), a populist party (GP – Young Party) and a few other small parties not represented in parliament. Their claim that a Gül presidency might endanger the foundations of Turkey as a secular state drew a favorable response within Turkish society, particularly in the country's major cities. This sharp public reaction to Gül's candidacy caught the AKP in general, and the duo of Prime Minister Erdoğan and Gül, in particular, off guard.

There is a potential electorate of protest located on the fringes of Turkish political life. In every election since 1991, it was this bloc of voters that determined the makeup of parliament. In 1991, it led to the victory of the True Path Party (DYP) and the rise of the Islamist Welfare Party (RP); in 1995, large numbers of the protest vote bloc supported a radical Islamist party; in 1999, many of these same votes went to the nationalists; and in 2002 much of this electorate supported the AKP, thus finally breaking the long-standing political status quo. But the AKP's assumption of power still left many feeling unsatisfied and disenfranchised. It was left to the opposition to grasp the first opportunity to give voice to their disquiet, and Erdoğan and Gül provided it by choosing Gül (whose wife wears a headscarf), instead of picking a less provocative candidate. Whether it was Gül's wife's headscarf or his persona is less important than the fact that instead of entering the general elections as a strong, highly respected leadership, Erdoğan and Gül appear to have lost some political ground.

Apart from its immediate political implications, the crisis raises a more disturbing question about the nature of the Turkish public sphere. Would an openly pious leader sitting with his headscarved wife in the presidential residence in Çankaya adversely affect Turkey's secular public sphere and institutional underpinnings? In fact, the posing of such a question is an oversimplification. Religious attributes have been present in the Turkish public sphere for the last 50 years, and as long as certain lines were not crossed, this re-discovered religion was not only tolerated but even encouraged at times. The fact remains that the unique Turkish combination of religiosity and a secular state of mind ("I am a Muslim at Home and a Turk outside", as a member of the late Prime Minister Özal's cabinet said once in the 1980s) has not undergone substantial alteration. While people are

constantly on the lookout for evidence showing that the secular ethos is being undermined, there is no such proof of that having happened. The Erdoğan government's policies over the last five years were an admirable mixture: Trying not to appear overly "Islamic", it allied itself in the European parliament with none other than the Christian-democrat bloc. No mosque was erected in Taksim square, the heart of modern Istanbul, alcohol production and sale is now privatized, making alcohol more accessible to many and people walking hand-in-hand in the street are not harassed more today than before. Still, certain religious initiatives were floated, albeit without much support from the government, and without success, for example an attempt to add adultery to the penal code in 2003.

To be sure, the crisis sparked by Gül's nomination might have a profound impact on the coming elections. The battle lines are unusual: On one side are the supporters of the European project, globalization and further relaxation of the state's tight grip on the public sphere, the Islamic-tinted AKP. On the other side are the secular nationalist CHP, DP and MHP, all of whom oppose the EU and the US war in Iraq. Should these three parties form a grand coalition, they might even defeat the AKP in next month's elections.