

# Avoidance of a Political Crisis in Turkey

## Cengiz Aktar

Director of the EU Centre,  
Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul

Turkey is a Mediterranean country currently at the negotiation stage for European Union membership. This is the final turning point before their ultimate membership, and it will undoubtedly take many years. To reach this final stage, since 2002 the Turkish governments have consented to major efforts being made to comply with the Copenhagen political criteria established by the Union in June 1993, concerning the political conditions required for the candidate countries, basically democracy, the rule of law and respect for human and minority rights.

### The Reaction to European Dynamics

During this period of reforms, lasting three years and concluding at the end of 2004, a vital aspect of Turkish political life needed to be seriously overcome: the weight of the military establishment in politics. Along with the army itself, the advocates of the old pro-military – or even militarist – elite saw their influence decline on both a legal and societal level. Observing a desire for change on the horizon, and consequently a reduction in their power, the military and the old Republican elites began to show their discontent from the very moment political reforms directly or indirectly affecting their power were put into practice. Accusing the government of undermining the secular basis of the Republic by diminishing the army's role of guarantor, these institutions used, and continue to use, all the institutional means open to them (the Constitution, the Constitutional Court, the legal system, the supervisory body of the universities, and so on) to ultimately rid themselves of the neo-Islamist gov-

erning party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Despite its Islamist slant, this is of course the party that has accomplished the most democratic political reforms, under European impetus, since the reformist period at the start of the Republic in 1923. More recently, in 2007, at important moments for the institution such as the election of the new President of the Republic and the long-scheduled parliamentary elections, the old elite resolved to place all its stakes on weakening the government party and ultimately returning to power. A gradual undermining process began at the start of the year, increasing in intensity until the date of the elections. The military repeatedly took a hand in the matter, particularly on 27th April, in the form of an electronic ultimatum issued on their website to call the governing party to order, stating that they were prepared to intervene if the need arose. Civil society reacted vehemently the following morning, causing the government to respond in turn during the afternoon, declaring the military's announcement unacceptable. At this point, constitutional order was restored, the elections were held and the ruling party was voted in with a wide majority. More than anything else, this episode shows the maturity of the Turkish political regime, which has succeeded in holding its own against military guardianship in the political sphere, and firmly rejecting it. It serves as an example of best practice for the Mediterranean region, where similar tendencies exist. Turkey's European process finally had a clear, decisive impact on the positive outcome of this major crisis.

### The Omnipresence of the Military in the Political Sphere

As was the case with the former dictatorships in the Northern Mediterranean, political life in Turkey is indeed marked by the omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence of the military establishment. This phe-

nomenon has its roots in the history of the Republic. The Westernisation of the Ottoman Empire that began in the early 18th century championed a single cause: assuring the permanence of the state. Transforming the social structure was of secondary importance and only took place as a result of the reforms that first and foremost affected the political machinery. The reforming elites of the Republican period, like those of the Ottoman era before them, were above all keen servers of the political cause. In Turkey, the State has priority over everything else, individuals and society.

The Great War that signalled the end of the Ottoman Empire was followed by the occupation of large parts of modern Turkey, in virtue of the Treaty of Sèvres signed in 1920. Territorial reduction was at its apogee and the State was in a critical situation. It was the largely dominant military component of the Republican elite that saved the State, created a modern Republic based on the Jacobin model, and thus provided itself with solid legitimacy. In the new State, the obsession with the integrity and security of the territory resulting from the traumatic experience of 1920 was to constitute the fundamental basis of the military bureaucracy's legitimacy, which remains to this day. Reinforced by the obsession with order inherited from the Ottoman era, which considers any conflict, whatever its origin, to be a potential danger, this legitimacy has been a constant throughout the history of the Turkish Republic. However, the standardisation process that is at work in Turkey, particularly since the start of the European Union pre-membership period, is increasingly confining the military establishment to military tasks. This requires time, given the legitimacy of the military function, and in any case it should be completed before membership is attained. The defence of secularism and internal security will be taken charge of by the civil forces, as occurs in other comparable countries where the demilitarisation of political life has been strongly backed by the European perspective offered to them. Expecting a country like Turkey, which was basically created by the military, or expecting a government that has had a very tense relationship with this establishment, to perform a rapid purge of the military's influence in the political sphere is simply not realistic. This is precisely what has emerged from the political crisis of 2007.

### **Brief Chronology of Events**

On 12th April the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, General Büyükanit, recalled the fact that the future

President of the Republic would need to comply with the principles of the Constitution. Two days later, several hundred thousand people took to the streets in Ankara in a demonstration in favour of the secularism they considered threatened by the manoeuvres of the governing party, the AKP.

## **The standardisation process that is at work in Turkey, particularly since the start of the European Union pre-membership period, is increasingly confining the military establishment to military tasks**

On 24th April, the AKP nominated Abdullah Gül as its candidate for the Presidency of the Republic. This designation, together with the decision to hold a parliament meeting to launch the presidential election process, shows the AKP's determination not to succumb to the secular field's demonstrations, pressure and provocation.

On 27th April, Parliament held its first round of votes to nominate the President. In Turkey the Presidency of the Republic is a largely ceremonial function, the President being elected by the Assembly. However, following the popular referendum embarked on by the governing party and held on the 21st October, the President was from then on to be elected by universal suffrage.

The candidate nominated by the governing party, Abdullah Gül, obtained the votes of practically all of the participating MPs (357), those in the opposition not having been present at the process. But as the quorum of 367 voters was not reached, the vote risked being declared invalid by the Constitutional Court. This was to be the case later on, when the matter was brought to Court by the opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP). But from then on a burning tension began to be felt in Ankara.

During the night, a communiqué was issued on the Armed Forces' website with all the appearance of an ultimatum to the civil authorities. The full translation of this announcement is as follows:

*"It is evident that certain circles are making continuous efforts to attack the fundamental values of the State of the Turkish Republic, namely its secularism, and that these activities have recently undergone a*

considerable increase. With such action, which is becoming widespread and goes so far as to include the organisation of alternative celebrations to our national holidays, the symbol of our State's independence and the unity of the nation, these circles are calling these basic values into question, demanding that they be redefined.

By way of example, a Koran recital competition was held on the national holiday of 23rd April. On 22nd April 2007, young girls were made to wear old-fashioned costume and chorus religious chants, with the participation of groups from Sanliurfa, Mardin, Gaziantep and Diyarbakir. At this hour of the night these little girls should have been in bed. At the same time, some individuals attempted to pull down portraits of Atatürk and Turkish flags, clearly showing the real aim and intentions of the organisers of the event. Additionally, instructions were given to all the headmasters of the schools in the town of Altindag near Ankara for 'celebrating the week of the holy birth'. In Denizli, schoolgirls wore veils and sang religious chants at an event organised by the mufti and a political party. Although the village of Nikfer, in the municipality of Tavas in Denizli, has four mosques, religious conferences for women have been held in a State school building. These events have been observed with concern. The activities held at the schools are announced in bulletins sent by the national Ministry of Education, but such events do not form part of this framework. Although the High Command was informed of them by the competent authorities, no measures have been taken. The fact that the local authorities were perfectly aware of the activities in question being organised and should have intervened and prevented them, makes the situation even more serious. Numerous other examples could be provided.

This fundamentalist concept, contrary to the Republic and whose sole purpose is to call into question the basic values of our State, has been encouraged by certain events and speeches over the last few days, widening the content of its activities. Many developments occurring in our region originate from disasters caused by the instrumentalisation of faith and religion in the political discourse. In our country, as is the case abroad, when an attempt is made to base the political discourse or ideologies on religion, it is corrupt and leads to a total loss of faith, as has been clearly seen in Malatya. There is no doubt that the only means by which the Republic of Turkey can live in peace and stability as a modern democ-

racy is by remaining loyal to the fundamental values of our State as laid down in the Constitution.

There is no doubt whatsoever that all of this contradicts the essential and total adherence to the Republic (as the Chief of Staff stated in his speech of 12th April 2007, insisting on the sincerity of this adherence) and infringes the fundamental values and provisions set out in the Constitution. Over the last few days, the Presidential debate has focused on the question of secularism. This turn of events is a cause for concern for the Turkish Armed Forces. We must remember that they are a party to this debate and that they are the unfailing guarantee of secularism. **If the need arises, the armed forces will clearly express their position and will act accordingly. No-one should doubt this.** In short, all those who oppose the idea of "Happy is he who calls himself a Turk!" coined by the great founder of our Republic, Atatürk, are enemies of the Republic, and so they will remain. The Turkish Armed Forces conserve an unwavering desire to fulfil without fault the duties commended to them by law to protect these values. Their bond with and their faith in these values are unshakeable."

This is the classic line of argument that served to justify numerous military interventions in the past – in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997 – with the effect of the parliamentary regime being suspended each time, the politicians arrested, judged and even sentenced to death as occurred in 1960, and the academics, intellectuals, union leaders and political opponents pursued, harassed, tortured or forced into exile.

**The army and the government upped the tone with unprecedented virulence at their face-to-face debates, which had been setting the secular establishment against that of the new AKP for several months, if not since the coming to power of the AKP in 2002**

The following day, 28th April, the military ultimatum was rejected by both the political analysts and the intelligentsia. It was only in the afternoon that the government spokesman and Minister of Justice Cemil Cicek took a stand, calling the non-elect to order with the words: "In a democratic country based on a legally con-

stituted State, it is inconceivable for a general to make this kind of statement against his government." Cicek made clear that "the Chief of Staff depends on the Prime Minister" and that the aim of his declaration was to pressurise the Constitutional Court. He remarked that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan had telephoned the Chief of Staff Büyükanit to demand an explanation. Despite these clarifications, the military's warning to the authorities was automatically accused of being a coup d'état, in this case of an electronic nature. It has gone down in the annals as an e-coup.

From this point on, the army and the government upped the tone with unprecedented virulence at their face-to-face debates, which had been setting the secular establishment against that of the new AKP for several months, if not since the coming to power of the AKP in 2002.

## Turkish democracy needs new impetus, and should by no means bask in this partial victory over the power of the military

On 29th April, a huge demonstration bringing together over a million people – something rarely seen in Turkey – was held in Istanbul with a variety of slogans running from "No to the EU, no to America" to "No sharia, no coup d'état."

When the Istanbul stock exchange opened on 30th April, it had dropped by 9%.

This was followed on 5th May by demonstrations in Izmir and other towns in the province, which in many cases were radio-controlled or at least picked up by the most radical fringe of the secularist Kemalist elite.

In Parliament, the last two rounds of the nomination of the President of the Republic had no effect, as the Constitutional Court had demanded a quorum of a third of the MPs present for the vote to be valid.

The sitting President, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, consequently retained his position and Turkey found itself immersed in an electoral campaign for elections brought forward by several months. Held on 22nd July, they consolidated the power of the AKP, which was seen as the champion of Turkish democracy, having succeeded in holding its own against the military. At the start of the legislature the new Parliament elected Abdullah Gül as the eleventh President of the Turkish Republic.

### Much Remains to Be Done

It is evident that the Turkish democracy emerged triumphant from this crisis, with the consecration of the governing party. However, the errors of the military class and the old secular, pro-militarist Kemalist elite frequently serve as an excuse for the government to pass itself off as the champion of democracy, by simply doing the opposite of whatever these groups advocate.

Today, Turkish democracy needs new impetus, and should by no means bask in this partial victory over the power of the military. The challenge remains intact and the AKP government, even though it has been reinforced by the elections, does not appear able to lead this struggle, as it prefers to share the power with the military, only troubling them as regards the quite necessary redefinition of secularism. This *modus vivendi* will neither affect the financial power of the military establishment nor bring it back under the authority of the elected party.