In Turkey, a Democratic Disaster Narrowly Averted

Jonas Clark | Friday, Aug. 1, 2008

ISTANBUL, Turkey -- It seems a rarity these days that a political party’s religiosity would work against it. In the last several decades, parties with religious affiliations have scored victory after victory in voting booths around the world, and seldom does their piety put them in jeopardy. Yet in Turkey, where the country’s secular establishment still wields considerable power, that’s very nearly what happened this week when its national court narrowly avoided banning the majority AK Party -- a coalition of moderates with decidedly Islamic roots -- from the country’s political scene.

The court’s decision brought an end to a political saga that has dominated Turkey’s political landscape for the last four months. Alongside a slew of other notable events -- an allegation of a possible military coup, a series of governmental police raids, and at least two major terrorist attacks -- it was Wednesday’s decision that most threatened to destabilize the country. For a nation dealing with a host of pressing political troubles, banning the majority party and throwing the country into political turmoil would have been catastrophic.

The court’s deliberations weren’t easy, however, and the margin was razor thin. At Wednesday’s press conference, a weary judiciary revealed that it had fallen just shy of the seven votes needed to expel the party, with six voting for, one against, and four decisive swing-votes crafting the compromise -- to cut the party’s funding but not ban it outright -- that would eventually be the outcome. It didn’t take much to read between the lines. “We believe that the political party concerned will get the message it should from the verdict,” Hasim Kılıç, the court’s president, told reporters. The message: You can stay as long as you don’t tamper with the country’s secular foundation.

Even to the most casual observer, it was evident that the ruling was more than a straightforward matter of jurisprudence. At the center of ongoing political showdown between Turkey’s secular establishment and its current Islamic majority, the case was the latest episode in a familiar struggle that has shaped Turkish politics for decades. Turkey’s secularists have long been the stewards of the country’s Kemalist vision -- a thoroughly modern Turkey where religion is solely a private matter -- and they have been able to maintain their influence through shrewd control of most of the country’s major establishments, including the judiciary, the military, and much of the country’s economic structure.

If the closure case is any indication however, that control may be eroding, as more and more Turks have become less enamored with the secularists’ stewardship -- a trend that was largely responsible for vaulting the AKP into power in the first place. Turkey’s burgeoning middle class, in particular, seems to have become disenchanted with the Kemalists’ frequent intervention in the democratic process, and they have plenty of evidence to support their views. In the last 50 years, the military has waged four coups, and the country’s court has banned no fewer than twenty-nine parties -- not exactly the kind of benevolent oversight that many Turks would like. Rather than let the democratic process run its course, they argue, Turkey’s secularists have been increasingly rigid in their idea of what constitutes “secular” and increasingly authoritarian in their attempts to implement it.

While this case was rife with drama and some not-so-subtle political maneuvering, the end result may be sign that Turkey’s political dynamics are shifting. For one thing, the secularist old guard looks increasingly out of touch. To an extent, its argument about the AKP was correct: staunch secularists are they are not. But the persuasiveness of the secularists’ case stops there. Few believe that the AKP is merely biding its time and waiting to spring a theocratic, sharia-inspired regime on a hapless Turkish public -- the kind of paranoid wolf-in-sheep’s clothing argument that one frequently hears from some of Turkey’s old-guard Kemalists. While Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has expressed mildly Islamist sentiments in the past, he has also emphatically reiterated his commitment to the country’s secular foundations, and the common refrain from he and his AKP associates is that it’s possible to have an Islamic orientation to the world alongside a commitment to a democratic system. In short, it’s the very sort of rhetoric that Westerners have long hoped to hear coming out of the greater Islamic world. With that in mind, it seemed perverse and self-defeating that the country’s secular wing would ban the party. In the end, while they still control many of the country’s institutions, the Kemalists are finding themselves further and further outside the mainstream and increasingly insulated from the views of most Turks.

While Wednesdays’ decision is certainly not the last chapter in Turkey’s volatile story, it is undoubtedly an important one. The last several months have underscored the country’s deep political divisions and drawn further attention to the ongoing
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The problem is that the world is not as simple as it seems. To answer the question of why the world is not as simple as it seems, we must look beyond the surface-level explanations.

Just like how the political system of a country is influenced by cultural and social factors, the world is a complex web of interactions that cannot be reduced to simple static models. The global economy, for example, is not a static entity but constantly evolving and changing.

To understand the world, we need a more nuanced approach that takes into account both the individual and the collective aspects. The world is not a collection of isolated entities but rather a complex system of interconnected parts.

It is not enough to view the world in terms of binary oppositions or simple dichotomies. We need to move beyond simplistic explanations and embrace a more holistic perspective that recognizes the complexity and dynamism of the world.

By adopting a more comprehensive approach, we can better understand the forces that shape the world and develop more effective strategies for dealing with the challenges we face. This requires a commitment to learning and adaptation, and a willingness to engage with the complexity of the world rather than seeking simple solutions.

The current system is not optimal for the development of our world. A more nuanced approach is needed to address the challenges we face and create a more just and equitable world.