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We must support the struggle for a democratic Turkey

By Marko Attila Hoare, 7th May 2007

Turkey is currently undergoing a crucial struggle for democratisation, one whose outcome will be pivotal for both Europe and the Middle East. Turkish foreign minister Abdullah Gul, of the avowedly Islamic yet moderate ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), has been forced to withdraw his candidacy for the Turkish presidency in the face of fierce opposition from the Turkish secular establishment – in the form of the army, the constitutional court and the secularist popular opposition. Yet this is merely the opening skirmish of what will be a major constitutional battle, with the governing party planning to alter the constitution to enable the president to be directly elected by the people, thus bypassing the constitutional court. A fierce struggle for democracy lies ahead. While many of us may sympathise with

educated, secular Turks who fear that the AKP and political Islam are whittling away at the Turkish secular state, yet secularism cannot be defended at the price of democracy. It is in our interests to support the democratisation of Turkey while promoting a *modus vivendi* between the traditional secular establishment and the new middle class represented by the AKP.

It would be a catastrophe for Western security if Turkey were to fall to Islamism. Yet in the struggle against radical Islam, secularism's best potential ally may be moderate Islam. The AKP is not a fundamentalist party, but is closer to the model of the Christian Democratic parties of Western Europe. It has governed responsibly while presiding over spectacular economic growth: the Turkish economy has nearly doubled in size in the five years since it took power, with annual growth rates averaging over 7.5 per cent; the previously rampant inflation has been brought under control; and the national debt to the IMF almost halved. Radical laws have not been pushed; a 2005 proposal by the government to criminalise adultery was dropped in the face of domestic and international opposition. Instead, the clash between secularism and moderate political Islam has centred on symbolic issues such as the ban on female government employees, teachers and students wearing the headscarf – the ferocious, if at times almost farcical passions aroused on both sides by this apparently innocuous issue have been brilliantly portrayed by Orhan Pamuk, Turkey's Nobel-prize winning author, in his novel *Snow*.

The inevitable question is whether lifting the ban on headscarves and making other symbolic concessions to moderate political Islam will appease the latter and prevent its radicalisation, or conversely represent the thin end of the wedge leading to the complete re-Islamisation of the Turkish state and society. Those of us who believe in democracy will argue that it should be given a chance; that a secular Turkey existing only through repression has no future. When the Algerian military responded in 1991 to the victory of the Islamic Salvation Front in a democratic election by annulling the election results and banning the victorious party, the result was a civil war that has cost over 160,000 lives and manufactured waves of murderous radicals who

have engaged in terrorist actions globally. Abrogating democracy in Muslim countries only stimulates radical Islamism.

Gul has gone on record to say that he envisions the ‘Islamic headscarf and the miniskirt walking hand in hand.’ Or as Elif Demir, a nineteen-year woman and AKP supporter was recently quoted as saying: ‘We have no problem with women wearing miniskirts, but why are they so bothered by our headscarves ?’. The headscarf is not an inherently sexist item of clothing like the veil, that conceals a woman’s identity and prevents her from communicating freely. A pluralistic society must permit the individual to dress freely according to his or her personal wishes. The present author supported the recent decisions of two British schools, which banned a pupil from wearing the full jilbab in place of her school uniform, and which suspended and ultimately sacked a woman teacher who insisted on wearing a veil at work. Yet the desire to wear the headscarf is not on the same scale as such incendiary, radical demands. The new generation of religiously observant Turkish women who want to wear the headscarf at school, university and work are neither fundamentalists nor reactionaries, but are representative of the new middle class created by the AKP’s economic miracle.

The struggle between the older secular establishment and the new Turkish middle class, symbolised by the debate over the headscarf and the resistance to Gul’s presidential candidacy, is a struggle over power as much as over values. Attempts by an old elite to monopolise power and patronage, and of a new, rising elite to distribute them more fairly, are part and parcel of modernisation and should be naturally resolved in favour of the latter – through what Marxists have traditionally referred to as a ‘bourgeois revolution’ but which may less controversially be described as the creation of an open elite and a society open to talents. Democracy may come at a price, if the new Turkish middle class succeeds in imposing more conservative values on the liberal urban society of which secular Turks are justly proud. Yet Turkey would hardly be alone in this: the fall of Communism and birth of democracy in Poland have given rise to legislative measures virtually banning abortion and restricting the rights of homosexuals – disgraceful, but

not so much so that the fall of Communist tyranny should be regretted. The rights of ethnic minorities in Latvia, Slovenia, Slovakia and elsewhere in Eastern Europe are in many ways weaker than they were under Communism – again, this is disgraceful, but dictatorship is more disgraceful. In every transition to full democracy, there must be a struggle to avoid throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

The Turkish secular establishment and, above all, the army are hardly paragons of liberal democratic values. The establishment of the secular Turkish Republic under Kemal Ataturk in the 1920s, in place of the moribund Ottoman Empire and following his successful war of liberation against British, French and Greek aggression, was a tremendous achievement, but one that came at a price: namely, the replacement of the Islamic values of the Ottoman governing class with those representing a particularly intolerant and monolithic nationalism. Many of Ataturk's followers had previously supported the regime of the Committee of Union and Progress, responsible for the Armenian Genocide in 1915. Under Ataturk, approximately one and a quarter million ethnic 'Greeks' – many of them actually Turkish-speaking Christians – were expelled from the Anatolian homeland that they had inhabited for centuries, if not millennia. The Kurds, who had patriotically fought in large numbers alongside the Turks in defence of the Anatolian homeland against the foreign aggressors and their local Greek and Armenian allies, were now denied all national and linguistic rights.

These atrocities may realistically have been inevitable side-effects of the creation of a secular Turkish nation-state on a wholly new basis, but the ultra-nationalist legacy has continued to poison Turkish political life ever since. The denial of Kurdish rights gave rise to a Kurdish nationalist insurgency and civil war that has claimed tens of thousands of lives. The Turkish military promoted radical Islamism as a movement counter to the leftist Kurdish nationalists of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) – former Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller admitted to having armed the 'Turkish Hezbollah' terrorist group. The resulting Islamist terrorist problem in Turkey, horrifically manifested in the Istanbul bombings of 2003, is largely a

Frankenstein's monster of the Turkish army's own creation, though one that has gelled with Al Qaeda's international terrorist movement.

The Turkish state has remained intolerant of other minorities as well as of the Kurds. The outbreak of the Greek-nationalist (EOKA) insurgency in Cyprus in 1955 sparked a regime-instigated pogrom of the Greek minority in Istanbul; the endemic tension with Greece over the Cyprus issue resulted in the Greek minority in Istanbul and on Turkey's Aegean islands being gradually encouraged to emigrate, through such measures as the suppression of Greek-language schools. The Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 was, arguably, a legitimate action to defend the Turkish Cypriot minority from the genocidal Greek Cypriot fascists of Nikos Sampson and EOKA-B. Thus, the Turkish Cypriots were spared the fate of the Muslim population of Crete, which was successively exterminated or expelled following Crete's separation from the Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth century. But Turkey's clumsy nationalist regime, in moral terms, then snatched a defeat from the jaws of victory by following up its invasion with the dismemberment of Cyprus and expulsion of the Greeks from the northern third of the island, creating an intractable conflict that represents a millstone around Turkey's neck, hampering its moves toward European integration.

Today, the narrow-minded nationalism of the Turkish army and governing classes jeopardises both Turkish and Western interests on a number of fronts. Although Turkey is by no means solely to blame for the political conflicts it is involved in, which are often the result of bad behaviour on the part of others as well, yet it has until recently not done itself many favours. The AKP government is very far from being free of Turkish nationalist inclinations – on the contrary – yet it at least represents a somewhat more flexible and pragmatic interpretation of this nationalism.

Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq is a relative oasis of stability in a country otherwise awash with violence and bloodshed, but Turkey's threat to intervene there raises the danger that even this oasis will be wrecked. Turkey's ostensible motive is to pursue PKK guerrillas who have taken refuge on the Iraqi side of the common border, but there is a deeper Turkish

desire to prevent the emergence of a viable Kurdish state in northern Iraq that would encourage the national aspirations of Turkey's own Kurds. Although the AKP government has closed ranks with the army over this issue, it is unlikely to have had much choice. By contrast, a government free of military pressure will undoubtedly prove to be a more reasonable and constructive partner for the US and its other allies over northern Iraq.

Turkey's AKP Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan made a landmark speech in 2003, arguing that Turkey had mishandled its Kurdish minority and arguing that more democracy rather than repression was the way to defeat Kurdish separatist terrorism. His government has granted the Kurds much greater cultural and language rights than they had previously enjoyed. A victory of the AKP in the struggle for democracy could only benefit the rights of the Kurds in Turkey, and this will rebound to produce a more enlightened policy vis-à-vis the Kurds in Iraq.

In Cyprus, the rejection in a referendum in 2004 of the UN's Annan Plan to reunite the island on the basis of compromise was the result of the bloody minded nationalist intransigence of the Greek Cypriot regime of Tassos Papadopoulos, which covertly favours continued partition and the exclusion of the Turkish Cypriots from what is supposed to be the common state. Astonishingly, Cyprus's joining of the EU in 2004 was not made conditional upon acceptance of the Annan Plan. The EU's readiness to accept the membership of a still-partitioned Cyprus has, in fact, made a future settlement less likely, given Papadopoulos's unconcealed intention to veto the membership of Turkey until the latter accepts his terms – something unlikely ever to happen. Indeed, the EU's acceptance of Cypriot membership on this basis raises the ominous question of whether this was in fact a deliberate blunder intended to keep Turkey out indefinitely.

Nevertheless, an encouraging development was the overwhelming vote of Turkish Cypriots in favour of the plan – counter to the wishes of their former hardline leader, Rauf Denktas. Whereas Denktas, the Turkish army's agent, opposed the plan, it was supported by his successor Mehmet Ali Talat, the current president of the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' and ally of

the AKP. Any further weakening of the military's choke-hold on Turkish political life can only have a positive effect in Cyprus, making the Turkish Cypriot side still more reasonable and allowing international pressure to concentrate on overcoming Greek Cypriot intransigence. This may eventually make possible a resolution of the Cyprus dispute, healing this festering sore in the Western alliance.

Finally, the entry of strategically crucial and economically dynamic Turkey into the EU will depend upon its respect for democracy, and it is the army, not the representatives of moderate political Islam, which is the greatest brake on democracy. European resistance to Turkey's EU membership, insofar as it is not motivated by cynical power-politics and a desire to pander to the Islamophobic prejudices of the electorates, is due in part to a semi-correct perception that Turkey is both poor and undemocratic. If the AKP emerges triumphant in its constitutional struggle, it will go a long way to ensuring that this ceases to be the case.

In 2005, Pamuk was indicted by a Turkish court for 'insulting the Turkish national character', after he was quoted by a Swiss newspaper as stating that Turkey was guilty of killing a million Armenians and 30,000 Kurds. That Turkey's greatest living novelist, soon to win the Nobel prize, could be indicted for freely stating his opinion indicates the extent of the army-backed restrictions on democracy, yet Erdogan stated publicly that the indictment of Pamuk had 'nothing to do with democracy'. The AKP government has sincerely pursued a rapprochement with Armenia, citing the centuries of Turkish-Armenian peaceful coexistence under the Ottomans and pushing for a compromise formulation over the crimes of 1915.

The French and other Western governments have cynically used the issue of the Armenian genocide to obstruct further Turkey's entry into the EU. As the present author has argued elsewhere, it is entirely unjust for the EU to insist upon Turkey's recognition of the genocide as a condition for its EU membership, given that the existing members have not been required to recognise their historic crimes – not even the Balkan EU states of Greece and Bulgaria, whose slaughter of Ottoman Muslims in the Balkan Wars of 1912-

13 and earlier both resembled, and were a catalyst to, the Ottoman slaughter of the Armenians. Yet it is entirely reasonable, indeed necessary, for us to demand that Turkey allow such issues to be debated freely, something that is unlikely to happen while the army and judiciary maintain their choke-hold on freedom of expression. This is literally a life-and-death question in Turkey: an ethnic-Armenian journalist, Hrant Dink, was recently murdered in Turkey after receiving death threats for raising the question of the genocide. His murder was strongly condemned by Erdogan, who claimed that ‘A bullet has been fired at Turkish democracy and free speech.’ Hundreds of Turkish citizens demonstrated against the murder, chanting ‘We are all Armenians’.

A democratic Turkey, in which power is shared between secular and moderate Islamic political currents whose representatives contest elections on a democratic basis, in which freedom of speech is secure and the army does not interfere in politics, will be increasingly attractive as an EU candidate; its economy will continue to grow, its minority rights record will continue to improve, and its foreign policy – over northern Iraq, Cyprus and Armenia – will become increasingly constructive. Such a Turkey will be a guarantor that the EU will not be an inward-looking, statist, Christian club but a dynamic union that embraces the Islamic component of the European identity. Such a Turkey will be an anchor for the Middle Eastern democratic order as it emerges. A democratic Turkey that recognises a role for moderate political Islam, in which women can choose whether to wear the headscarf or the miniskirt, is likely to be a more attractive model for reformists in the Middle East than the current authoritarian and aggressively secular Turkish state. The democratisation of the Middle East requires the democratisation of Turkey.

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