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With its nose bloodied, democratic Turkey needs our support

By Marko Attila Hoare, 31st July 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Following the narrow failure of Turkey's constitutional court to ban the progressive, pro-Western AKP governing party in Turkey, Turkish democracy remains under attack from the Kemalist establishment and from both ultra-nationalist and Islamist extremists.

2. Turkey's alienation from both the EU and the US is leading it to draw closer to Russia and Iran. The replacement of the AKP by a more authoritarian regime will encourage such a Turkish realignment, at the expense of the West.

3. The UK, as Turkey's traditional friend, must keep Turkey on board the Western alliance and Turkish democracy afloat, by waging a sustained public campaign to win British and European opinion in favour of Turkey's EU membership.

Yesterday, Turkish democracy received a bloody nose, but not a knock-out blow. Turkey's constitutional court voted six to five in favour of banning the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) - to which Turkish President Abdullah Gul also belongs - and banning its leading figures from politics. The court vote fell short of the seven-vote majority needed for a ban. Nevertheless, the court voted to cut the AKP's state funding. Hasim Kilic, the court chairman and chief justice, described the ruling as a 'serious warning' to the AKP: 'I hope the party in question will evaluate this outcome very well and get the message it should get,' he said; 'The verdict on cutting treasury aid has been given because of members who decided that the party was the hub of anti-secular activities', although 'not seriously enough' to ban the party.

This attempt to bully democracy is taking place in an EU candidate country with the seventh-largest economy in the Council of Europe and the fifteenth-largest in the world, and which has pursued a for-the-most-part highly progressive foreign policy in recent years. Under the AKP, Turkey has been attempting to [broker](#) a peace agreement between Israel and Syria. The Turkish government has attempted to restrain the hawkish voices favouring an onslaught against the Kurds of Northern Iraq. Turkey was one of the first countries to recognise Kosova, and was alone among the larger NATO countries in staunchly supporting a Membership Action Plan for Macedonia at the April NATO summit in Bucharest. It has sincerely worked for a resolution of the Cyprus dispute and for rapprochement with Armenia.

The AKP government has also pursued a reformist policy at home, improving Turkey's democratic and human rights credentials to the point where the EU, despite strong opposition from some of its members, was

compelled to start accession negotiations. And it has presided over an unprecedented expansion of the Turkish economy. All the more poignant, therefore, that the court's move to ban the democratically elected party of government appears to have been triggered by the latter's attempt to push through a democratic freedom for Muslims that is already enjoyed across Christian Europe: the right of women students to wear headscarves while attending university. The readiness of the Turkish Kemalist establishment to wreck its country's democracy and economy and to plunge it into constitutional chaos, and possibly civil war, simply in order to maintain its exclusive grip on state power at the expense of the new Muslim middle class represented by the AKP, indicates the difficulties Turkey faces in its journey toward full democracy.

Turkish democracy is not under attack only by the secular establishment, but by fascist terrorist elements - both from the ranks of the secular ultra-nationalists and from the ranks of the Islamists. Earlier this month, Turkish police foiled preparations for a violent *coup d'état* by members of the Ergenekon clandestine organisation; those arrested included three retired Turkish Army generals. This was followed by an Islamist terrorist attack on the US consulate in Istanbul, and then days ago by a terrorist bomb attack on a civilian target in Istanbul that the government and police have blamed on Kurdish PKK separatists but which some observers [suggest](#) was more likely to have been the work of Ergenekon. There have been [credible suggestions](#) that the apparently antithetical Kemalist and Islamist extremists have, in fact, been coming together on the basis of the values they share: opposition to the West, the US, 'Zionism', democracy and liberalisation. As Mustafa Akyol [writes](#) in the *Turkish Daily News*: 'I can't say anything about whether there are indeed criminal links between these groups, but the ideology they share is all too similar. Their aim is simply to keep Turkey as a closed society cut off from the world and ruled by an authoritarian state. What they fear and abhor is democratization and liberalization.'

With the constitutional court's verdict, Turkish democracy has been shaken but not toppled, but the dangers facing the country remain, as do the dangers facing the Western alliance in relation to Turkey. Turkey's political classes

have been increasingly disillusioned in recent years, both with the EU and with the US. The slowness of Turkey's EU accession process, coupled with the apparent outright refusal of some EU countries such as France and Germany ever to allow Turkey to join, have reduced the EU's appeal among Turks. Meanwhile, Turkish relations with the US have been strained by the apparently 'distabilising' policy being pursued by Washington in the Middle East and the former Soviet Union: the war with Iraq; the possibility of an attack on Iran; support for regional democratisation and 'colour revolutions'; and above all the US's alliance with the Iraqi Kurds. Conversely and consequently, Turkish relations with both [Russia](#) and [Iran](#) have been improving. Indeed, the Kurdish issue has strained Turkey's relations not only with the US, but also with [Israel](#), which is also [unhappy](#) with Turkey's broadening cooperation with Iran in the field of energy.

In the current Turkish political constellation, it is the AKP that is the EU's and US's best friend. Indeed, Turkey's Public Prosecutor Abdurrahman Yalcinkaya, responding to Western criticisms of his attempt to close down the AKP, [denounced](#) the EU and US as 'imperialists' seeking to erode Turkey's national sovereignty by using 'collaborators' such as the 'fundamentalist' AKP and Turkish liberals who 'claimed to be intellectuals'. While we may wish to retain good relations with Ankara irrespective of which regime holds power there, our inability to remain silent in the face of assaults on democratic freedoms, coupled with the inevitably anti-Western outlook and rhetoric of those launching such assaults, will ensure that a potential future replacement of the AKP regime with a more authoritarian Kemalist one will inevitably damage Turkey's relationship with the Western alliance. Conversely, a more authoritarian Turkey will find authoritarian Russia, Iran and even China as increasingly congenial partners.

The lingering threat to Turkish democracy is a threat to the West's relationship with a crucial member of its alliance; indeed to positive stability in the Middle East, Balkans and Black Sea region in general. The failure of the constitutional court to ban the AKP has averted a still worse danger - that the suppression of the democratic, moderate Islamic political option would have driven disillusioned AKP supporters into the arms of the Islamists,

laying the basis for an Algerian-style civil war in Turkey. But so long as the secularist establishment remains determined to curb the AKP, this is a danger that has been kept at bay, not ended permanently.

Turkey resembles Serbia, in that it is a Balkan country undergoing a long-drawn-out transition to full democracy, in which there can be no quick or easy success. But Turkey's size, strength, geographic location and geostrategic importance make it much less amenable to pressure than Serbia. Indeed, with Turkey at the height of its power as a country, but with its internal divisions stretching it to breaking point, the Turkish Kemalist establishment may increasingly feel rather like the Serbian Communist establishment under Milosevic in the late 1980s and early 1990s: ready to gamble on an extreme solution, on the assumption - probably correct - that the West would lack the will to resist it. In this context, although Brussels was correct to indicate that Turkey's EU accession process would be halted in the event of the ruling party being banned, nevertheless the carrot may prove more effective than the stick in advancing the cause of Turkey's democratisation. This, however, cannot mean unprincipled concessions over the Kurdish or Cyprus questions that would damage the West's moral standing.

Keeping Turkish democracy alive requires keeping Turkey's EU accession process alive, for it is EU membership that has provided the crucial motor to Turkey's democratisation. But at present, it is Turcophobic EU leaders such as France's Nicolas Sarkozy who are dominating public discourse in Europe over the Turkish issue. If Turkey is to be saved for democracy and for the West, the UK has to fight back in the arena of public opinion - both at home and in Europe. The UK has traditionally supported Turkey's EU accession; quite apart from the geostrategic arguments in favour preserving Turkey's pro-Western alignment, an EU containing Turkey would be less dominated by the Franco-German axis and more resistant to centralisation, therefore more congenial to the inclinations of both Britain's political and its popular classes - and indeed to the inclinations of some other EU members - than an EU without Turkey.

The British government must fight a sustained public campaign in favour of Turkey's EU membership, to persuade the Turkish people that they have a European future, to bolster the fortunes of our friends in the AKP, and to convince the British and European publics of the crucial importance of the Turkish connection. Sarkozy is pursuing a thoroughly [unprincipled and damaging](#) policy toward South East Europe, but to his credit, he is not afraid to be outspoken and assertive in pursuit of what he perceives to be France's national interests in this region. We must not be afraid to be similarly outspoken and assertive. If the present trends in EU politics continue, we shall lose the battle for Turkey. And with it, we shall suffer a major defeat in the battle for both the Balkans and the Middle East.

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