

What exactly is happening in Turkey? On the way to normalisation or breakdown?

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The current saga of events can be traced back to the last-minute nomination of Abdullah Gül as the AKP's candidate for the Presidency in April. On the evening of the first round of votes held in the Turkish Grand Assembly on the election of the President, the military issued a statement on its official website, highlighting the threat to secularism and hinting at a possible intervention if deemed necessary. While this was interpreted by most commentators as yet another military memorandum issued to intervene in civilian politics, the statement needs to be viewed in a wider framework in order to have a better understanding of what it implies for Turkish politics as well as for Turkey's relations with Europe. The statement has demonstrated once again that the military perceives itself as the guarantor of secularism as well as territorial integrity of Turkey. However, the way in which the statement was issued (via an electronic website) as well as its highly rudimentary language revealed significant differences from the military's past warnings, when they were delivered either through officially and publicly declared memoranda or through NSC meetings.

One can thus interpret this as a restricted warning and even an indirect tool to influence the Constitutional Court's decision on the constitutional validity of the presidential elections, yet one circumscribed by the fear of external reaction, most primarily from the EU. Furthermore, the novelty of the move, in the context of the Turkish political scene, was not just the indirect means and the ambiguousness of the way in which it was owned up to by the high command, but also the reaction of the governing party. The AKP responded that this was unacceptable in a democracy where the military would have to be subordinate to the government. The military did not retaliate. This testifies once again that although civil-military relations are far from being normalised in Turkey, the shape in which they are evolving are not independent from the context provided by Turkey's relations with the EU.

The demonstrations following in the wake of Gül's nomination and the issuing of the military memorandum have been frequently interpreted in the West as a manifestation of the clash between the seculars and the Islamists in Turkey. This, however, is an oversimplified construction of events, given the complexity of the political, economic and sociological situation in Turkey. It would be more accurate to interpret these tensions as part and parcel of the long-running divide between the centrist and peripheral forces in the country going back to the early days of the Republic.

The centre-periphery divide in Turkish politics, a term first coined in the 1970s, mainly refers to the often conflictual and antagonistic relationship between the staunchly secular state elite of the Republican tradition in line with the centrist Ottoman bureaucratic tradition and its legacy of the benevolent father state, and the rural populations and traditional cultural, religious and ethnic groups in Turkey. Hence the centre traditionally comprises the military, bureaucracy and the urban elite whereas the periphery refers to those provincial forces with lower economic standards, upholding traditional values.

The composition of both groups underwent certain changes in the past decades, the most notable of which was the extension of peripheral groups to include the peripheries of urban and metropolitan cities that emerged with the migratory movements within the country. Religion, which had always been a significant trait of the periphery, became much more pronounced among these groups with the

rise of identity politics and social mobilisation in the 1980s. Urbanisation and migration not only made these groups more visible, but also a strong competitor for state power.¹ This has now been well illustrated in the drama over the Presidency, a post reserved by the Constitution for a figure that will represent the preferences of the state elite in the framework of his (or her) more-than-symbolic powers, such as the appointment of high court judges. One can indeed interpret these recent political and societal tensions as a necessary and unavoidable state of affairs on the road to normalisation and consolidation of Turkish democracy, which had – from the very beginning – at its heart this central problematique of the centre and the periphery.

This, however, will be a difficult journey, the management of which could result either in consolidation of, or further damage to democracy in the country. The elections to be held on 22 July, and even more importantly the subsequent election of the President, can be considered crucial in this respect. Despite speculations that the elections may not be held due to escalating PKK terrorism inside the country, bringing with it immense pressure for the army to enter into Northern Iraq, the elections have to be held on the specified date for any hope of political stability and normalisation in Turkey. Election campaigns have intensified in the last two weeks and are being fought over key issues such as the fight against terror, security and foreign policy. For the AKP, one of the most prominent electoral issues seems to be the Presidential election, where they appeal to the public with a discourse that victimises the party on the grounds that it receives unjust treatment from the state powers. The result of the elections could either be a one-party AKP government, or a coalition government that could either be inclusive or exclusive of the AKP.

A single-party AKP government is no guarantee that these tensions would be eased on the way to normalisation. Its stance on the Presidential election has shown that the party, despite its official rhetoric, can hardly be considered a champion of democracy. The party sought no consensual mechanisms with the opposition and the civil society with the aim of selecting a candidate accepted by a large segment of Turkish society. In fact, their candidate was not declared until the very last minute, blocking any public deliberation on the issue. Similarly, immediately following the Constitutional Court's decision, the party sought to amend the Constitution to allow for the election of the President through a public vote, once again seeking no deliberation and consensus on an issue with fundamental systemic effects.

The AKP's post-election stance on the election of the President will thus be significant in this respect. The AKP's constitutional amendment for the election of the President by the public was vetoed by the President and taken to the Constitutional Court. The Constitutional Court has turned down the case, paving the way for the election of the President through a referendum. The constitutional amendment will be put to public vote in October. Despite this decision, it is still unclear whether the next President will be elected by the public or the post-election Parliament. On the basis of Article 102 of the Constitution, the post-election Parliament is still responsible for electing the next President. In a scenario where the new Parliament is unable to agree on a President, the Parliament could eventually be dissolved, paving the way for new elections, possibly to be held together with the referendum on the constitutional amendment. However it is still possible that the new government might agree on a President acceptable for a wider segment of society where the referendum would make it possible for the public to elect subsequent Presidents. In the latter case, stability could be restored much more quickly.

What makes normalisation and consolidation difficult in the Turkish context is the baggage of the 1982 Constitution, which is proving to be more inadequate than ever for Turkish politics and society undergoing rapid transformation. One can argue that the peripheral forces, just like the traditional elite, are now attempting to utilise the anti-democratic elements of the Constitution, in order to secure their

¹For a more extensive discussion of the centre-periphery divide and its implications for present-day Turkish politics, see Hasan Bülent Kahraman, 'The Problem of Political Opposition in Turkey', Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association: Washington, 2 May 2005, accessible at <http://www.tusiad.us/Content/uploaded/OPPOSITION%20IN%20TURKEY-HASANBULENTKAHRAMAN-ARTICLE.PDF>

own hold on power. The fact that the office of the Presidency holds more than symbolic powers, despite the lack of public accountability, illustrates how the anti-democratic elements of the Constitution, so far perceived as a guarantor for the power of the state elite, can turn against them in the hands of a political adversary. A similar argument can also be made for the 10% electoral threshold, this time uniting the government and main opposition against other political groups such as the Kurds that are excluded from the political process.

A lot of responsibility here falls on the European Union. The election of Sarkozy in France in combination with the rising Euroscepticism in Turkey is not helping EU conditionality. The most recent and concrete step in hampering Turkish efforts towards the EU was the blocking of the opening of the chapter on the economic and monetary union by a group of countries led by France, on the grounds that the opening of this chapter would imply full membership for the country. Although the EU accession process is not currently highly on Turkey's agenda, the government is taking measures to progress on three chapters of the *acquis* this summer. Furthermore, the government released a plan for the unilateral adoption of a wide set of EU laws in April. Instead of dwelling on never-ending debates on European identity and questioning Turkish accession in principle, the focus of the Union can better be on encouraging the move towards normalisation and consolidation of Turkish democracy by carrying on with the accession negotiations as planned. This should be coupled with pressure from the EU for some outstanding changes needed in the Constitution, most notably to lower the electoral threshold.