



# TURKEY UPDATE

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## **THE JDP FAILURE TO ELECT A PRESIDENT TRIGGERS A NEW TEST FOR TURKISH DEMOCRACY**

The inability of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) to elect a new Turkish President in 1980 after more than a hundred inconclusive rounds was followed by a military intervention and the third interruption of the democratic process since the introduction of multiparty democracy in 1950. The failure of the current Justice and Development Party (JDP) dominated TGNA to elect a replacement for President Ahmet Necdet Sezer prior to the scheduled end of his seven year term in office on May 15 has fortunately not provoked a crisis of similar severity. However, what has to be characterized as the JDP's mismanagement of the presidential election process, which witnessed an unprecedented intervention by the Constitutional Court, a dire warning by the Turkish General Staff (TGS) and mass demonstrations against the government, has created a difficult new test for Turkish democracy.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who sought to retain sole control of the process, had insisted all along that the current TGNA would choose the new president from the ranks of the JDP parliamentarians and that the general elections would not be held until the end of the five year parliamentary term on November 3. Consequently, the collapse of the effort to elect Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul and the subsequent acceptance of early elections on July 22 cannot be considered as anything other than a major reversal for Erdogan and his party. The magnitude of the failure is underlined by the fact that Erdogan and his colleagues had enjoyed virtually uninterrupted success since they had created the JDP after breaking away from the Islamist Virtue Party in August 2001. How Erdogan will manage the aftermath of his first serious setback is likely to determine the future of the Turkish political system as well as that of his party.

Although most of its leaders had been part of the Islamist movement since their formative years, the JDP had declared from the outset that it was not a party of Islamists but of 'conservative democrats.' This was a clear indication of its willingness to work within Turkey's secular system which has shut down four Islamist political parties and pushed out of office an Islamist-led coalition in 1997. The JDP had then taken full advantage of the corruption and mismanagement which had characterized previous governments to win an overwhelming majority in parliamentary elections in November 2002. It had followed up by ably utilizing the International Monetary Fund-backed economic recovery program and progress towards European Union (EU) accession talks, with the invaluable assistance of generally sympathetic domestic and foreign business communities and media, to enjoy a relatively trouble-free four and a half years in government. However, with the powerful military flexing its muscles yet again and society increasingly polarized between the JDP and its supporters and those who view them as a threat to Turkish secularism, the JDP is facing a very real challenge to a great extent of its making.

## HOW A NEW PRESIDENT WAS NOT ELECTED

As Sezer's term moved towards its end, the Turkish political agenda was increasingly indexed to the identity of his successor and, in particular, on whether Erdogan would seek to replace him. While the JDP majority in the TGNA, which has the task of choosing the president in accordance with the 1982 constitution, appeared to assure Erdogan the presidency, it was less clear if he would use it to vault himself into the Cankaya Palace like Turgut Ozal and Suleyman Demirel.

During the unusually prolonged period of speculation, Erdogan kept his cards close to his chest and avoided clear responses to all questions on his possible candidacy. When he finally began to speak publicly about the presidency at the beginning of April as he had promised, Erdogan's comments were typically vague and often contradictory. However, he was consistent in his rejection of widespread calls for a 'compromise candidate' and in belittling the significance of the campaign against his presidency, spearheaded by Deniz Baykal, the leader of the opposition Republican People's Party (RPP), but extending well beyond the RPP into wide segments of Turkish society, as 'children's games.'

Despite his dismissive public attitude, Erdogan should have recognized that the stakes were high for him and his party and that there were consequences to failing to build a consensus while trying to reduce a significant event to a routine matter of the JDP using its parliamentary strength to choose the president. Having endeavored since the 2002 elections to alleviate the concerns of those who were worried about the implementation of 'a secret Islamist agenda' that would 'threaten the secular state' as JDP's detractors charged – especially through the effort to gain accession to the EU – it is surprising that Erdogan was not more attentive to the potentially polarizing effects of his candidacy.

Having finally found an issue which could galvanize the majority of citizens who had not voted for the JDP but had refrained from demonstrating open displeasure with the JDP government, Baykal and his other parliamentary and extra parliamentary opponents tirelessly charged that Erdogan's ascension to the presidency would mean the capture of the one institution which had effectively acted as an impediment to the exercise of unfettered power by the JDP government and its TGNA majority. At the same time, they focused on the symbolism of Mrs. Erdogan's Islamic headscarf entering Cankaya – where it has hitherto been banned like in all official institutions – as underlining the defeat of the secular system.

The possible costs associated with Erdogan's candidacy began to rise sharply in mid-April. On April 12, Chief of Staff General Yasar Buyukanit, who has taken a markedly harder line than his predecessor Hilmi Ozkok, declared that the new president had to "adhere to basic principles of the republic and the ideal of a secular, democratic state in deed as well as word." The following day, outgoing president Sezer warned yet again that the Turkish secular system "faced a threat unprecedented since the foundation of the Republic." Two days later, hundreds of thousands of people marched in Ankara in support of Turkey's secular system shouting anti-Erdogan slogans such as "we do not want an imam in Cankaya."

Although Erdogan continued to be dismissive of the escalating campaign as he proceeded to formal consultations with his party colleagues just days before the April 25 deadline, there are credible reports that he was discomfited by the vehemence of the opposition. Nonetheless, he may have been more influenced by private opinion polls suggesting that the JDP would not fare as well in the parliamentary elections without him. Whatever the reason, following a meeting of the JDP Central Committee on April 18, Erdogan let it be known that he would decline the opportunity to seek the post. Having floated as possible alternative candidates various JDP members with wives who did not cover, Erdogan reportedly settled on Defense Minister Vecdi Gonul whose wife is also uncovered. However, his choice of Gonul,

which may have been privately shared with Buyukanit, was apparently undercut by TGNA Speaker Bulent Arinc who threatened to cause a costly schism in the party by running himself if neither Erdogan nor Gul ran. As a result, Erdogan turned to Gul, whose wife also covers, just one day before the deadline.

Notwithstanding the fact that he had been expecting to return to the post of prime minister which he had held briefly in the early months of the JDP government with the elevation of Erdogan to the presidency, Gul made a belated effort to mollify the political opposition. However, his meetings with Baykal and the leaders of the Motherland Party (MP) and the True Path Party (TPP) were ultimately fruitless as all three parties decided to boycott the first ballot on April 27. With Gul restricted to 357 votes in the 550 member TGNA, the RPP immediately took the issue to the Constitutional Court on the grounds that 367 members constituting a two thirds quorum had not attended the session. In retrospect it is clear that the JDP had made a grave error in not taking seriously the threat of an appeal to the judiciary until the very last minute.

Before the Constitutional Court could even begin its review, a sharply worded statement released by the TGS just before midnight on April 27 effectively escalated the political and constitutional dispute into a crisis involving the very future of the Turkish political system. The statement declared that the military were “observing with concern the questioning of secularism which had become the focus in the presidential process” and that “as the firm defenders of secularism” they were ready “to fulfill their duties.” Although the JDP government responded with its own statement the next day rejecting the barely veiled threats of an institution “subordinate to the prime minister” as “inconceivable in a democracy” and confirming its intention to proceed with the process to elect Gul, the winds had shifted decisively against Erdogan and his colleagues. On May 1, the Constitutional Court, seven of whose eleven members were appointed by Sezer, duly proceeded to nullify the presidential vote despite the lack of a precedent in previous elections and, after a predictable second failure to gather the required 367 members to attend the vote in the TGNA on May 6, Gul withdrew his nomination.

## **ON TO CRUCIAL PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS**

Three days before having to abandon its effort to elect a new president, the JDP had pushed through a motion in the TGNA to hold early elections on July 22. As mandatory parliamentary elections would have automatically followed within ninety days the failure to choose a new president by May 15, the JDP’s move – backed by the parliamentary opposition – was an acknowledgement of the inevitable. Nevertheless, it has helped to ease some of the tensions engendered by the abortive presidential election by reaffirming the functioning of the democratic process.

Attention now shifts to what is certain to be a highly-charged election campaign under the watchful gaze of Sezer, who – much to the chagrin of the JDP – is now set for an unexpected extension of his stay in Cankaya, and, much more importantly, of the TGS. Having drawn an ominous line in the political sands, it remains to be seen whether the TGS will now place their full reliance on the Turkish voters in the confrontation with the JDP or have contingency plans involving additional steps to curb the political party responsible for what it has warned is the erosion of the secular principles of the country. Ankara is full of wild rumors that there could be an attempt to seek the closing down of the JDP in the near future and it may be significant that a Turkish news magazine, Nokta, recently published what it alleged were the details of preliminary planning for two military coups codenamed Moonlight and Blonde Girl as far back as 2003.

For its part, having overcome its initial shock after the tumultuous events of April 27, the JDP has been busily trying to regain the initiative. It followed up its defiant response to the TGS statement by a denunciation of the Constitutional Court decision – Erdogan branded it as “a shot fired at democracy” – and a frantic push in the TGNA for major constitutional amendments, including the direct election of a president by Turkish voters. Having failed to push for this important change throughout its term in office because of the firm expectation that the TGNA would choose a president from the ranks of the JDP, the Erdogan government’s move had the air of hasty retaliation designed to recover lost prestige. In any case, with the near certainty of a veto by Sezer and little time for a second approval by the TGNA and a subsequent referendum before the general elections, Erdogan himself has conceded that there would “probably be only one ballot box in front of the voters on July 22.”

While opinion polls still suggest that the JDP is well ahead of all of its rivals, their accuracy is uncertain and a second electoral triumph for Erdogan is far from assured. In addition to unexpected obstacles which may well be put in its path in coming weeks, the JDP also faces political rivals who finally believe that they can exploit vulnerabilities exposed by its recent setback after a frustrating four and a half years in which they made very little headway. The RPP in particular will be eager to electorally exploit its success in blocking what it will no doubt characterize in the campaign as ‘the JDP’s conquest of the last remaining secular bastion.’ The polarization of Turkish society – further underlined by demonstrations in four additional cities after the initial gathering in Ankara – is likely to facilitate the RPP’s effort to present itself as the obvious choice for voters concerned with a threat to Turkish secularism, especially if it is able to complete its recent efforts to form an alliance with the late Bulent Ecevit’s Democratic Left Party.

The crisis prompted the surprisingly rapid conclusion of the much-discussed merger between the TPP and the MP and they are planning to challenge the JDP under the banner of the Democrat Party. The leaders of the two center right parties, whose bitter rivalry had contributed to their failure to get over the 10 percent national barrier for representation in the TGNA in 2002, will be hoping to get the backing of conservative voters who may now be disinclined to vote for the JDP. However, they are likely to be hampered by a negative reaction from some of their supporters for going along with the RPP-led boycott of the TGNA vote on a new president and for failing to come out strongly against the TGS demarche.

The JDP may be justifiably more concerned with the challenge of the National Action Party (NAP) for the allegiance of the conservative voters. The NAP, which had also polled below 10 percent last time, has long been the leading nationalist party in Turkey and has credible hopes of tapping into the growing patriotic fervor in Turkey. The neo-Turkish nationalism as it could now be termed is a potent force feeding on resentment against the EU and the United States as well as Kurdish separatist terrorism. While the EU has become a virtual object of scorn for putting forward what are universally regarded as excessive conditions on Turkish accession, particularly on Cyprus, the United States is blamed for failing to take concrete steps to curb terrorist activities against Turkey by Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) elements based in northern Iraq and its support for the Iraqi Kurdish leadership which is accused of backing the PKK and consolidating its position at the expense of the Turkmens. Significantly, Erdogan has been making a sustained effort to underline the JDP’s own nationalist credentials through his rhetoric and his use of the Turkish flag. However, Erdogan and his government are at a disadvantage in their efforts to compete for the nationalist vote because of their ambivalence on the Kurdish issue and their understandable desire not to exceed certain limits for fear of further undermining the relationship with the West which is important for Turkey as well as for the JDP itself.

Although the final shape of the TGNA will be determined by the course of the campaign to a greater degree than most previous elections and the number of parties and independent Kurdish candidates that ultimately gain parliamentary representation, the JDP must be regarded as the clear favorite as it begins

to make its case to the Turkish people. It has a charismatic leader with a proven populist touch backed by the best grassroots organization and can legitimately claim credit for its stewardship of the impressive economic recovery. Nonetheless, recent events have made it even more imperative for the JDP to try to balance its strong appeal to core supporters who tend to come from the more devout segments of society with an effort to reassure those concerned with the erosion of secularism. While its followers will surely be even more supportive of the JDP because of the recent crisis, there is also a very real possibility that its less committed backers could shy away from a party perceived to be in conflict with ‘the state.’ This was certainly the case with the Virtue Party in the 1999 elections two years after the party it had replaced – the Welfare Party – was driven out of office. It is important to note, however, that Erdogan and his colleagues were able to win outright power three years later despite their links to both of these parties.

## **TOWARDS A NEW NATIONAL CONSENSUS?**

While the level of rhetoric and recrimination will be high during the next two months and could further divide Turkish society, the campaign could also conceivably offer an opportunity to begin a process to achieve a new national consensus. The recent crisis may have heralded the end of the uneasy cohabitation between the increasingly more devout Turks who resent the limitations imposed by the secular system and look to the JDP to ease them and their fellow citizens who are genuinely worried about a drift to a religious state. As the founders of the secular Turkish Republic had not envisioned such coexistence and the tensions that would ensue, their successors have to find a formula that will avoid a costly *denouement* that could begin to unfold as early as on July 23 if the JDP wins an outright victory. While the JDP bears a major burden in providing a convincing reaffirmation of its irrevocable commitment to Turkish secularism, its opponents have an equally important responsibility in acknowledging that the JDP and its supporters need to be confronted only through the democratic process.

If wisdom were to ultimately prevail through the achievement of a new understanding, it would not only help to assure the future of Turkish democracy but also demonstrate the compatibility of observant Islam with secularism. Needless to say, failure would have serious consequences that will not be confined to Turkey. Although Washington’s initial uncertain response to the TGS demarche hinted at indifference to the fate of Turkish democracy, the Bush Administration has since made amends by echoing the sentiments of the EU in reaffirming its “commitment to the democratic process” and its opposition to “military interference.” To be sure, the Administration has lost much of its earlier enthusiasm for promoting democracy in the Broader Middle East and the role that Turkey could play in this effort and has concerns over the likelihood of a JDP-led government failing to provide meaningful support in the confrontation with Iran just like at the outset of the war in Iraq in 2003. Nevertheless, it surely recognizes the vital stakes involved in preventing the escalation of the current domestic crisis in Turkey, particularly as the country also faces the very real prospect of the end of its efforts to enter the EU – a major factor in buttressing Turkish democratic reforms – and the inevitable renewal of its search for a geostrategic identity.

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