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### **Don't Misread Turkey's Generals**

On April 27, following the first round of the presidential elections, the Turkish General Staff (TGS) issued a strongly worded warning about the erosion of the *secular* nature of the republic. Many in the West—particularly in Europe—consider this statement by the military to be unacceptable interference in the political process. However, given the unique nature of Turkey's democracy, this statement may ironically end up preventing a much worse outcome.

The statement underlined the legal and constitutional responsibility of the TGS to preserve the secular nature of the Turkish republic. **Indeed, especially in a majority Muslim nation, democracy is threatened if there is absence of separation between state and religion; Islam and Islamist movements have tended historically to increase the scope of their authority over all aspects of life.** The TGS statement can and should be interpreted as a wake-up call for both the government and those opposing it. The intent of the statement was to urge all Turks to remain faithful to the basic principles of the Turkish republic during the upcoming presidential and later parliamentary elections. The chief of TGS espoused these precise sentiments at a press conference on April 12, saying that “one needs to be committed to the principles of the republic not just in words, but in essence, and demonstrate this in actions.”

The modern Turkish Republic was founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, who was himself a brilliant military leader. Ataturk fought and won a war of Turkish liberation during World War I—and did so without relying on the flag of Islam to unify the people against the West. He understood that the Ottoman Empire fell behind the West because its Islamic leadership ended up exerting too much influence over society, resisting necessary technological and social reform simply because they were Western in origin. For example, Ottoman religious leaders forbade the printing press (arguably one of the most critical inventions in the course of Western civilization) from entering the Empire, calling it “the Devil’s Invention.” Ataturk rightly believed that Turks could only enjoy the benefits of modernity and catch up with the West if they developed scientific thinking. For this to happen, he believed that state and religion needed to be kept strictly separate. In a famous statement announcing the abolishing of the *sharia* code of law based upon the Koran, he rhetorically asked “how can a nation soar when half of its people, the women, are chained to the ground?” Ataturk practiced what he preached; his daughter became the world’s first female fighter pilot.

In light of its fiercely secular past, the Turkish military has enjoyed great legitimacy in the eyes of most Turks compared to other institutions. Unfortunately, this has led many people to expect the military to “save them” from internal and external challenges, illiberal political parties, or corrupt governments. **Instead of taking on the accountability to ensure that their secular system is preserved through the normal**

**democratic process, the Turkish people have become lazy and vote irresponsibly, believing that if anything goes wrong, the military will put it right again.** For example, during the last parliamentary elections in 2002, many Turks angry with the outgoing government voted for the Justice and Development Party (AKP). When I later asked some of these individuals why they voted for a party that they themselves suspected of having Islamist roots, I was told, “all other parties failed us...let’s try these guys...if they don’t play by the rules, then the military will kick them out.”

I was horrified to hear such views. My concern only grew as, during the next five years, Turks who became increasingly disturbed by the AKP’s foreign and domestic policy—as well as by a thread of Islamism creeping in at the local levels—actually began hoping and expecting for the military to “step in.” This is not the proper way for a democracy to function, nor is it responsible behavior from a population that wishes to call itself democratic. Despite such appeals from the people, the TGS remained silent, rightfully hesitant to interfere in the democratic political process.

I published an article in *Newsweek International* this past December, estimating that there was a 50-50 chance of a coup. I reminded readers how, only ten years ago, Turkey’s openly Islamist government was removed from power—in what is commonly referred to as a “post-modern coup.” I saw that coup coming, as a senior military leader had told me that the lesson he learned from the Iranian revolution was that if the TGS waited too long, Turkey could lose its secular democracy. In the months leading up to the military’s intervention, the Turkish government refused to recognize the possibility that it could be ousted and duly continued along its course. Unfortunately, the response to my December article was similar—I was attacked viciously for daring to mention the possibility of a coup.

Regardless of those wishing to bury their heads in the proverbial sand, it was known for some time that this year’s presidential elections would be contentious. Many feared that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, or someone who came from a similar Islamist past, would end up “occupying” the presidency, an office which is often referred to as “the last bastion of secularism” in Turkey due to the veto power the president enjoys over parliament. Particularly over the past year, relations between the secular establishment and religious forces in Turkey have grown increasingly tense.

Last May, a 29-year old attorney named Alparslan Arslan shot and killed a judge in the Turkish Council of State, Turkey’s highest administrative appeal court. Arslan confessed that his motives were religious, acting he said in retaliation for a recent judicial ruling against a schoolteacher who wore a headscarf on the way to and from work. Shocking as it was, the killing was a single act of violence perpetrated by a single individual—and yet it sparked massive demonstrations in Ankara. Thousands of people took to the streets to protest what they perceived to be the erosion of Turkish secularism by Islamism. Yet, the government dismissed the protests as being a response merely to the killing, ignoring the larger symbolic meaning behind them.

All this reveals either a conscious decision to ignore this growing discontent—or a failure to understand it. The current Turkish government has been misreading a swelling popular opposition to the course it is charting, instead believing that it is representative merely because it enjoys a 2/3 majority in the parliament. However, many of the votes the AKP received were an expression of dissatisfaction with the previous government. Many more did so under the assumption that if AKP began to take an Islamist path, the military would intervene to restore secularism. Moreover, **due to peculiarities in the Turkish electoral system, the AKP was able to win a full 66% of the parliamentary seats despite garnering a mere 34% of the popular vote in 2002.** In Turkey, a political party must meet a 10% minimum threshold to receive seats in the parliament. In 2002, only no party other than AKP crossed this threshold—except for the Republican People’s Party, which earned 19.4 percent. (The True Path Party received 9.54 percent and the National Action Party 8.35 percent) The remaining parliamentary seats were reassigned between the two and AKP ended up with 363 out of 541 seats in the parliament. With an AKP member in the presidency, the party will have full control over the executive and the legislature, along with the ability to influence the judiciary—thus effectively ending the separation of powers in the country.

Such a situation would not be a true democratic government, but instead a single-party rule. The party leaders, including Erdogan and Abdullah Gul, have evolved considerably in their appreciation for secular democracy over the past five years, but they are not yet democrats. They do not take criticism well and they do not work to build consensus in government. To be fair, this criticism is by no means limited to the AKP; it is far too common in Turkish political culture. The AKP is certainly committed to elections and to the bare institutional trappings of democracy through which it has attained its current numerical advantage. However, the AKP is not committed to liberal democracy as it is understood in the West. As recent events have revealed, the Turkish population is now reacting to this.

This brings me to a critical point. **When the will of people cannot be heard in democratic elections, the people will go around the system.** We saw that in 2003 in Georgia, where the ruling government attempted to stay in power despite the will of the majority. Surprising many observers, this led to a tremendous popular reaction, which culminated with the Rose Revolution and brought down the government. Georgia was lucky because it is a small country where the majority of the people want a pro-West, pro-NATO government. We saw similar displays of people power in 2005 in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, although instability remained in those countries due to a lack of strong leadership and fundamental ideological splits within the populace. Ukraine is still stuck in a major constitutional crisis, with the country divided almost in half. The Ukrainian case may unfortunately herald Turkey’s future, in which the government overplays its hand because it has the numbers and the West on its side.

**The “people power” demonstrations of this past weekend need to be understood in the right way.** The protests in May of last year were not properly understood by many Turks (especially the government), nor were they fully comprehended by the West. **The majority of the organizers and participants at last year’s and last weekend’s**

**protests were women. Simply put, it is the women who have the most to lose from Islamism; it is their freedoms that would be curtailed.** Turkey does not exist in a vacuum; Islamism is on the rise everywhere. It is encroaching on secularism and liberalism not only in the Middle East, but also in Europe and even the United States. For a country like Turkey that has majority Muslim people, the necessity to keep the state separate from religion is particularly vital. Islam, more than most religions, has the potential to holistically dominate all aspects of society. If all Turkey's leaders come from the same Islamist background, they will—despite the progress they have made towards secularism—inevitably get pulled back to their roots. This is the concern of the protestors.

The sad thing is that the mingling of religion and state is bad not only for the state but also for the religion. I have spoken with devout Muslims across the world and the consensus is that **the imposition or endorsement of a religion by the government undermines the faith as much as it does the state.** In a free society, the fact that one *chooses* to abstain from drinking alcohol, committing adultery, or wearing a headscarf is a powerful expression of one's devotion to religion. By removing this choice and making such behavior compulsory, the significance of that action is completely removed. Turkey has already held these debates and made its decision over 80 years ago.

If Prime Minister Erdogan and the AKP assume they have the popular mandate simply because of the majority they hold in parliament, and succeed in installing Gul as president, Turkey will enter a period of protracted instability. The two camps will inevitably clash—and not just verbally. Thus far, the demonstrations have been overwhelmingly peaceful, but there is very real anger and fear beneath the surface. Future protests, composed of reactionary ultra-nationalists, might not be as docile as the family-friendly crowds that characterized this weekend's demonstrations.

In two days, on May 2, the constitutional court will decide whether the presidential elections will move forward or whether early parliamentary elections should be held—as demanded by the opposition. I believe that the TGS made its statement on Friday not to influence the court, but as a warning to both sides. The military does not want a clash between the secularists and the Islamists. It hopes that its statement will compel the various actors to seek compromises.

**I believe the only way out of this crisis is early parliamentary elections** because it is clear that the current government has lost its legitimacy to elect the next president. The 10 percent election threshold should be lowered to a more reasonable number, such as 5 or even 7. This would force the existing parties to engage in consensus building, eroding the combative, zero-sum political culture that typifies Turkey today. However, I am not sure that the government will take this route. It may instead continue to ignore the myriad signs indicating that it has lost its popular mandate.

Unfortunately, the EU's response to these recent events will only embolden the AKP. Following the TGS statement, the EU warned the Turkish military to respect the rules of the democratic game. Simply put, the EU does not understand these dynamics and is

wrong to blindly endorse the AKP merely because it is an elected government. **As demonstrated countless times throughout history, a fair election is only the beginning of democracy and by no means guarantees a just government.**

Fortunately, the US seems to be taking the right approach. The statement it released following this weekend's developments indicates a sober understanding of these dynamics. The State Department carefully crafted its rhetoric in an attempt to stay neutral, expressing that it had "faith" in Turkish secular democracy and the constitutional process.

What happens next? The AKP may well succeed in getting Gul elected—their numerical advantage in parliament makes that a very real possibility. **However, Gul's election will only exacerbate tensions in Turkey.** Gul will not be a strong president. He is already weakened by the perception that he is the "second choice" for his party (after Erdogan). Moreover, anyone from the AKP with an Islamist background—like Gul—will not be independent from Erdogan and the AKP majority. He will never be able to oppose anything done by the Prime Minister or the parliament.

**Sadly, if Prime Minister Erdogan does not call for early elections (ideally reducing the absurdly high 10% threshold), he will be held responsible for leading the country to internal chaos. This is the proper democratic action to take—though it will not be easy for Erdogan to do.**