TURKEY'S IDENTITY CRISIS

Posted on September 11, 2010 by Keghart

NATIONAL POST

Category: Opinions

By Peter Goodspeed, The National Post, 11 September 2010
The battle between secularist liberals and conservative Islamists for Turkey's soul takes a new twist Saturday as the country holds a referendum on 26 constitutional reforms. The timing of the vote is no coincidence.

By Peter Goodspeed, The National Post, 11 September 2010
The battle between secularist liberals and conservative Islamists for Turkey's soul takes a new twist Saturday as the country holds a referendum on 26 constitutional reforms. The timing of the vote is no coincidence.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan picked the 30th anniversary — to the day — of Turkey's last military coup as a reminder of a period of brutal repression, when hundreds of thousands were arrested and tortured, parliament abolished, and political parties and trade unions banned.
His reform package, widely seen as a preliminary step toward rewriting Turkey's constitution, intends to curb the political power of the military and bring the secularist-dominated courts more firmly under the control of his ruling Justice & Development Party (AKP).

More importantly, the referendum has re-ignited a decades-old struggle between secularists and religious conservatives over how to combine modernity, democracy and Islam.

One of the world's largest democracies with a Muslim majority, Turkey is struggling to maintain a precarious balance between Western secularism and orthodox Islamic revival.

Its tumultuous, sometimes bloody politics have always been a complicated competition between democrats and autocrats; pro-Europeans and old-style nationalists; free-traders and protectionists; civic activists and military/bureaucratic guardians; new and old elites.

But underlying the struggle for power is the unresolved confrontation between advocates of a modern secular state and those calling for the re-establishment of Islamic law.

Mr. Erdogan's AKP has its roots in political Islam, but shuns the Islamist label. Instead, the party insists it is little more than a Muslim equivalent of Europe's Christian Democrats.

In power since 2002, the AKP says its proposed constitutional reforms will liberalize Turkey's constitution, strengthen democracy and end military interventions in politics.

They will also bring Turkey closer to meeting the European Union's membership requirements.

The referendum package would restructure the secularist-dominated courts by adding more judges to the Constitutional Court, limiting their terms in office and allowing parliament to appoint some judges.

The reforms will also curb the powers of military justice and allow civilian courts to try soldiers for

coup attempts. In addition, it will remove the article of the 1982 constitution that forbids the prosecution of generals responsible for the 1980 coup.

Turkey's military has staged three coups since 1960 and forced the resignation of a civilian government as recently as 1997.

Banning political parties — something that almost befell the AKP two years ago when the Constitutional Court fell just one vote short of ruling the party undermined Turkey's secular system — will become harder and ultimately have to be approved by parliament. The reform package also gives civil servants the right to collective bargaining, but not the right to strike.

Mr. Erdogan's opponents brand the changes a power grab, saying the aim is to roll back secularism by stealth.

The AKP-designed package, which was forced through parliament on a simple majority vote in May, will dilute Turkey's system of checks and balances and complete Mr. Erdogan's subjugation of the military, while bringing the judiciary under the government's control, they argue.

Secularists fear the constitutional changes will extend the government's control over all state institutions and leave Turkey vulnerable to pro-Islamic policies.

Kemal Kilicdaroglu, leader of the main opposition Republican People's party (CHP), sarcastically claims Mr. Erdogan "laments being able to appoint the president, the parliamentary speaker, governors and chiefs of police, but not a single judge."

CHP billboards feature a photograph of a chador-clad woman and urge people to vote no "if you don't want to be forced to dress like nuns."

Turkey's judiciary has clashed regularly with the AKP, rejecting a government attempt to lift a ban on wearing headscarves in public universities in 2008 and almost banning the party for undermining the secularist constitution later the same year.

The AKP's predecessor, the Welfare party, was declared unconstitutional and banned in 1998.

Mr. Erdogan himself was jailed in 1998 and briefly banned from holding public office for inciting religious hatred after he publicly read an "Islamic poem" while mayor of Istanbul.

It included the verse, "The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets and the faithful our soldiers."

The secularist struggle against a rising conservative middle class, which forms the backbone of AKP support, has transformed the constitutional debate into a plebiscite on Mr. Erdogan's eight years in power. That may have implications for Turkey's role regionally and internationally, but most of all it could determine the outcome of general elections that have to be held before July.

A yes vote will boost the AKP's chances of re-election and strengthen Mr. Erdogan's hand as prime

minister, while a no vote or only a marginal win could cramp the government's style and undermine his leadership.

Months of impassioned campaigning have polarized the country and triggered divisive debates over its position in the world.

Mr. Erdogan branded critics of the constitutional reforms "coup plotters" and accused opposition parties of using "disinformation and black propaganda."

He has portrayed the referendum as a chance to repudiate the military's legacy of intervention, which surfaced again this year when public prosecutors arrested 49 high-ranking officers for allegedly plotting another coup.

Investigators claim they uncovered a conspiracy, code-named Operation Sledgehammer, in which ultra-nationalist officers planned to promote a coup by creating chaos through assassinations and attacks on Islamist targets, such as mosques.

No one has been convicted. The military insists documents offered to back up the allegations were created for military war games, not a coup.

The opposition parties accuse Mr. Erdogan of being autocratic and say the AKP is bent on staging a "creeping counterrevolution" or "Islamist coup."

TURKEY AT A GLANCE

HISTORY

In 1923, Kemal Ataturk's establishment of the Republic of Turkey overturned centuries of Islamic tradition and imposed wide-ranging secular reforms. He banned the wearing of fezzes for men and veils for women. Polygamy was outlawed and women were given equal rights. Ataturk insisted on the separation of government and religion.

COUPS

Military coups have overthrown three governments in 1960, 1971 and 1980. The armed forces engineered the resignation of another government in 1997. Turkey's military has always seen itself as the guardian of the secular legacy of the republic and was constitutionally charged with defending its secular nature.

STRATEGIC VALUE

Sitting astride the Bosporus, where Europe meets the Middle East, Turkey is one of the world's largest democracies with a Muslim majority. It maintains a precarious balance between western secularism and Islamic revival. It has the second largest military in NATO.

PRESSURES

A Kurdish insurgency rages in southeastern provinces, along with a decades-old conflict with Greece over its occupation of part of Cyprus and claims to portions of the Aegean. Turkey is the subject of lingering resentment in the Balkans over historical conflicts with the Ottoman Empire and has yet to settle claims of an Ottoman-directed genocide against the Armenians. Radical left-wing terrorists are a hangover from the Cold War.

MILITARY MIGHT

Turkey remains a NATO member. Its air base at Incirlik is a critical staging area for U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and other parts of the Middle East.

ISRAEL AND U.S.

While Turkey's military has had a close relationship with Israel for nearly 15 years, the AKP government has been increasingly critical of it. Mr. Erdogan lambasted Israel's attack on the Turkish-owned Gaza sanction-busting ship the Mavi Marmara that killed nine people. Some fear if Turkey becomes more openly Islamist, it may ally itself more closely with Iran and other Muslim nations, while distancing itself from the West.