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Triumphant Turkey?

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Turkey and the Dilemma of EU Accession: When Religion Meets Politics
by Mirela Bogdani
I.B. Tauris, 228 pp., $92.00; $28.00 (paper)

The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey
by Banu Eligur
Cambridge University Press, 317 pp., $85.00

Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, and Modernity: A History, 1789–2007
by Carter Vaughn Findley
Yale University Press, 527 pp., $40.00; $30.00 (paper)

Streets of Memory: Landscape, Tolerance, and National Identity in Istanbul
by Amy Mills
University of Georgia Press, 288 pp., $64.95; $24.95 (paper)

Against the backdrop of bloody upheaval in the Arab world, Turkey's national election in June seemed a triumph of democracy. Candidates for parliament were secular and religious, pro-military and anti-military, in favor of Kurdish rights and opposed. Fifty million people were eligible to vote, and 87 percent turned out. There were no serious incidents. Votes were counted quickly and fairly.

Kayhan Ozer/Anatolian Agency/epa/Corbis

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his wife Emine at a campaign rally in Istanbul, June 11, 2011

The result was a decisive victory for Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. His party, Justice and Development, failed to win a supermajority in parliament that would have allowed him to promulgate the country's much-anticipated new constitution almost by decree. Nonetheless it won more votes than all other parties combined, winning its third election in a row and making Erdogan the most powerful Turkish leader in more than half a century to win three consecutive terms. He now enjoys more power than any Turkish leader since Kemal Atatürk, who founded the Republic in 1923.

This victory was testimony to Erdogan's accomplishments. Before Justice and Development won its first national election in 2002, Turkey had spent years under weak coalition governments servile to the military. It suffered periodic economic crises and was almost invisible on the world stage. All of that has changed. Erdogan's strong single-party governments have broken the army's political power, turned Turkey into an economic powerhouse, and made it a major force in the Middle East, the Caucasus, the Balkans, North Africa, and beyond.

Yet despite this, many Turks are uneasy. Some worry that the economy, which grew at a spectacular 8.9 percent last year, may be overheating. Others fear that Erdogan's renewed power will lead him to antidemocratic excesses. A boycott of parliament by dozens of Kurdish deputies cast doubt on his willingness to resolve the long-festering Kurdish conflict. There is also a new source of uncertainty, emerging from uprisings in Arab countries. For the last several years, Turks have pursued the foreign policy goal of "zero problems with neighbors." In recent months they have been forced to realize that they cannot, after all, be friends with everyone in the neighborhood.

Politically Turkey has changed more in the last ten years than it did in the previous eighty. For generations the army was able to enforce strict secularism in the tradition of Ataturk, but a new ethos, more open to religious influence, has changed the terms of politics and public life. Erdogan prays daily and his wife wears a headscarf. In some Turkish towns, Justice and Development mayors have sought to restrict the sale of alcohol or establish single-sex beaches. This has alarmed many secular-minded citizens. Erdogan could help calm their fears, but instead he has become increasingly strident. Turkey has emerged from the shadow of military power, a breakthrough of historic proportions. Whether it is moving toward an era of European-style freedom or simply trading one form of authoritarianism for another is unclear.

Erdogan is often angry. Some Turks attribute this to his background. His family comes from the Black Sea region, a stronghold of aggressive nationalism, and he grew up in a rough-and-tumble Istanbul neighborhood, Kasimpasha, whose residents are known as easily offended and quick to fight. For a decade he was a close follower of the only true Islamist politician Turkey ever produced, the late Necmettin Erbakan, who was prime minister for a year in 1996–1997 until pressure from the military, which feared he was leading the country toward religious rule, forced him to quit. Erdogan attended an Islamic academy and then studied "commercial sciences" at an obscure school. Although he served as mayor of Istanbul in the 1990s, he knew little of the outside world when he became prime minister in 2003.

Another explanation for Erdogan's intensity is politics. During the election campaign, he sought to draw votes away from ultra-nationalists—part of his attempt to obtain a supermajority. That led him to use harsh rhetoric. In March, for example, two journalists

were arrested on charges that they had been in contact with military officers who were plotting to overthrow the government. Soon afterward, several thousand people marched down Istanbul's main street protesting the arrests. They held placards reading "Free Press, Free Society," and "Turkey Rates 138 in Press Freedom"—a reference to a recent ranking by Reporters Without Borders.

The next day, Erdogan delivered a speech in Istanbul. It was an ideal moment for him to reassure panicky citizens and foreigners worried about press freedom in Turkey. Instead he denounced defenders of the arrested journalists, accusing them of launching a "systematic defamation campaign against Turkey" shaped by "evil-minded intentions and prejudices."

This demagogic language disturbs many Turks, including some who admire what Erdogan has achieved. "I have never been as positive and enthusiastic as I am now," one of the country's visionary business leaders, the octogenarian Ishak Alaton, a lifelong human rights campaigner, told me in his office overlooking the Bosphorus. But he also lamented that Erdogan has begun to govern with "the sense that he's invulnerable and omnipotent and all-powerful."

Because Erdogan has a background in Islamic politics, and because he has pushed for wider acceptance of the Muslim headscarf, it is tempting to see the central conflict in Turkish society as pitting secularism against growing religious influence. This is misleading. None of the dozens of people I met during a recent visit suggested that Turkey is in danger of slipping toward Islamist rule. Turkish society has defenses that most Arab societies lack: generations of experience with secularism and democracy, a growing middle class, a booming export economy, a still-lively press, and a strong civil society based in universities, labor unions, business associations, and civic, human rights, and environmental groups. The emerging conflict in Turkey is not over religion, but styles of power.

During Erdogan's first term, Turkey made great strides toward consolidating its democracy. The death penalty was abolished, restrictions on free speech were loosened, and the scourge of jailhouse torture was all but eliminated. But the momentum did not last, and in his second term, Erdogan turned to other projects. Now some Turks fear that with this third four-year term will come a third Erdogan, emboldened by his biggest electoral victory yet and increasingly autocratic.

It is no accident that these changes coincide with the rise and fall of Turkey's campaign to join the European Union. Parliament's burst of reform between 2003 and 2005 came when Europe seemed tantalizingly ready to embrace Turkey. The pace of reform slowed as Europe's enthusiasm weakened. Now, largely due to resistance from France and Germany, there is little prospect of Turkish membership during the coming decade. Croatia has just been approved for membership in 2013, but Europe is in no mood to accept 75 million Turks who would have the right to live, work, and vote in EU countries. "The combination of

(Muslim) religion with (large) size seems to create the problem," Mirela Bogdani concludes in her study *Turkey and the Dilemma of EU Accession*.

Partly because the EU has slammed its door in Turkey's face, Erdogan's government has been looking elsewhere for friends. This has helped draw Turkey away from half a century of subservience to Western foreign policy. Its first act of defiance came in 2003, when parliament voted against allowing American troops to invade Iraq from Turkish soil. Since then, Turkey has broken ranks with the West on two important issues. It favors negotiation with Iran and stronger pressure on Israel to change its policies in Gaza and the West Bank.

This newfound independence was reflected in last year's effort by the Turkish freighter *Mavi Marmara* to break the Gaza blockade, which led Israel to send commandos to attack the ship; nine Turkish civilians were killed. In 2010 Turkey made a failed effort, along with Brazil, to broker a nuclear deal between the United States and Iran. These steps made Erdogan immensely popular in the Muslim Middle East. They also set off a burst of anger in Washington—not from the Obama administration, which still considers Turkey a valuable partner, but from anti-Obama and pro-Israel politicians and groups who believe that Turkey is abandoning its secular heritage and Western-oriented foreign policy.

Some scholars share this fear. Banu Eligur, who has taught courses on political Islam at Brandeis University and is the author of *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey*, believes that Erdogan's government has "mobilized against the secular-democratic state" by naming pious Muslims to be "high-ranking civil servants in public administration" and by bullying the press, the judiciary, and universities. In fact, much of what Erdogan is doing seems popular. A recent opinion survey taken by an outside group found 62 percent of Turks in favor of Erdogan's foreign policies. In another, when people were asked to rate their level of religious belief on a scale of one to ten, 71 percent rated themselves at seven or higher. In *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, and Modernity*, the historian Carter Vaughn Findley observes that Erdogan's government has surpassed the old secular establishment "both in recognizing the value of a religiously neutral government as a guarantee of pluralism and in espousing the reforms required to advance Turkey's EU candidacy"—even if that candidacy is now a long-term project at best.

Turks, like almost everyone else, were unprepared for the turmoil that erupted in the Middle East early this year. Erdogan was quick to demand Hosni Mubarak's resignation after protests began in Egypt, but in Libya, where much Turkish money was invested, he tried a conciliatory approach for a couple of weeks before swinging behind the opposition to Qaddafi. In neighboring Syria, after years of cultivating the Assad regime, he could not induce it to adopt serious reforms when protests broke out.

Sectarian violence and the possible breakup of Syria would threaten Turkey. Seeking to avoid

that—and eager to limit the growing influence that Iran exercises through Syria—Turkey has supported Syrian protesters and opened its borders to thousands of refugees. Besides serving its own interests, this is a valuable way for Turkey once again to cooperate with the West. There is even hope for better relations with Israel. Two weeks after the election, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sent a letter to Erdogan saying that he was ready "to work with the new Turkish government on finding a resolution to all outstanding issues between our countries."

Shortly before Erdogan won his first national election in 2002, prosecutors charged that he was plotting to subvert the secular order, and asked the Constitutional Court to shut down his party and ban him from politics. He survived by a single vote. That apparently led a cabal of officers to discuss the possibility of deposing him by force. Documents implicating these officers and others in a host of crimes—not just plotting to overthrow the government, but also organizing horrific murders like that of the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in 2007—have been leaked to the press. The first hearing in 2008 set off a cascade of legal charges, an indictment that runs to several thousand pages, and the arrest of hundreds of suspects, including at least thirty active-duty generals. The plot to destabilize the country, and the cases connected to it, are popularly known as "Ergenekon," a reference to a mythic Turkic homeland and the name that plotters allegedly gave to their subversive plan.

Mike King

Many Turks greeted the opening of this case with both astonishment and jubilation. Investigating the military and its corrupt allies in the judiciary and bureaucracy was widely seen as a major step toward consolidating democracy. As the case has dragged on, however, it has taken on a different tinge. The authenticity of some incriminating documents has been challenged. Prosecutors have cast their net so widely that people have begun to wonder whether the true purpose of the case is to punish conspirators or to intimidate critics of the government. Since the government has been slowly replacing prosecutors with people it favors, there is suspicion that politics is once again intruding into the judiciary.

The cases of the two journalists arrested in March, Ahmet Sik and Nedim Sener, show the complexities of the sprawling Ergenekon case. Evidence against them, like evidence against most other defendants, is secret. A judge has rejected an appeal for their release pending trial, meaning they are likely to be held for many months. Both men have devoted their careers to investigating the hidden forces—military, economic, and religious—that work insidiously to undermine democracy in Turkey, so the suggestion that they are part of antidemocratic plots strikes some Turks I met as dubious. They suspect that the journalists have either upset powerful people or are being used as examples to frighten others.

"I can no more believe these two guys were part of Ergenekon than I can believe Obama is part of the Ku Klux Klan," said Hakan Altinay, a former director of the Open Society Foundation in Turkey, which is supported by George Soros. "It's an important episode for left-liberal opinion, which has up to now been part of this government's core support. It's a tipping point."

If intimidation is a goal of this case, it may be working. "I wonder, is my phone tapped?" a young journalist told me at the end of an interview in Istanbul. "Should I censor myself?"

Intolerance is nothing new in Turkey. In *Streets of Memory*, a recent study of cultural attitudes in an Istanbul neighborhood that was a jumble of nationalities, Amy Mills writes:

> The price of belonging, in Turkey, comes at a cost—the forgetting of particular histories at the expense of the frequent retelling of others and the silencing of particular memories that cannot entirely be repressed.

She finds troubling evidence of "polarization in thinking about national identities and minority histories." People shy away from recalling, for example, the infamous pogrom in 1955 when rioters backed by police attacked homes and businesses owned by Greeks, Armenians, and Jews. But she also notes "an increasing curiosity and desire among Turkish citizens to learn more about places and pasts in Turkey."

Any discussion of openness and tolerance in Turkey quickly turns to the Kurdish question. There are more than ten million Kurds in Turkey, concentrated in the impoverished southeast. The state has traditionally insisted that they assimilate into Turkish society. Many refuse to do so. Their resistance set off a rebellion that raged for more than a decade and cost tens of thousands of lives. There has been little fighting in recent years, and for a while it seemed that Erdogan would take decisive steps to end the conflict. In 2005 he declared in Diyarbakir, the main Kurdish city, that he was ready to rectify "mistakes and sins of the past."

Much has changed since then. The use of the Kurdish language was once sharply restricted, but now there is a Kurdish-language television station. A university in the ancient town of Mardin has been allowed to open a center for Kurdish studies. During the recent election, Kurdish candidates were allowed to campaign in their own language. None of this would have been possible a decade ago. Still, Erdogan has not done enough to satisfy many Kurds.

"I'm not going to vote for him," a Kurd from the long-oppressed town of Hakkari told me before the election. "He doesn't keep his promises. He said he would bring true democracy, but we haven't seen it yet."

Under Turkish law, parties that receive less than 10 percent of the vote are excluded from parliament. As this year's election approached, leaders of the Kurdish Peace and Democracy

Party (BDP), recognizing that they could not reach that threshold, decided that their candidates should run as independents rather than on a party slate. Thirty-six were elected. Many have alleged ties to the outlawed Kurdish rebel group, the PKK.

Their attempt to take their seats in parliament did not begin well. A dispute erupted over whether a deputy charged under the draconian antiterror laws of the 1980s could take his seat. When parliament was sworn in on June 28, all Kurdish nationalists stayed away in protest. A day that might have shown the strengths of Turkish democracy became an embarrassing reminder of the country's internal conflicts.

Attacking the government on sensitive issues like Kurdish rights, criticizing its handling of the Ergenekon case, and ridiculing Erdogan personally are not the only ways Turkish journalists can endanger themselves these days. There is another subject some fear to probe too deeply: the power of Fethullah Gulen, a shadowy but immensely influential Turkish religious leader. From a secluded estate in Pennsylvania, where he moved to escape possible prosecution for alleged antisecular remarks in the 1990s, Gulen directs a worldwide movement that is one of the most remarkable forces in modern Islam.

According to Carter Vaughn Findley, the movement has millions of followers, owns newspapers and television stations in Turkey and beyond, and claims to oversee more than one thousand schools in more than a hundred countries—including the United States, with thirty-three in Texas alone. It sends doctors to Africa and elsewhere when disasters strike. After the September 11 attacks, Gulen took out an advertisement in *The Washington Post* declaring that "Islam abhors such acts of terror." He has good relations with non-Muslim religious leaders—in 2003 he met with Pope John Paul II—and rejects fundamentalism.

In his native Turkey, Gulen's movement has become a uniquely influential force. Both Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul are said to admire it. A cable written in 2006 by an American diplomat in Ankara, released by WikiLeaks, cited

> reliable reports that the Gulenists use their school network (including dozens of schools in the U.S.) to cherry-pick students they think are susceptible to being molded as proselytizers, and we have steadily heard reports about how the schools indoctrinate boarding students.

Press reports suggest that graduates of these schools have risen to important posts in government and the bureaucracy. Secularists see them as foot soldiers in a quiet but insidious campaign to penetrate the state and, ultimately, make it more religious.

No one can be sure, because the movement resists scrutiny. Somebody presumably oversees Gulen's worldwide education network, for example, but no one knows who that is. Scholars who want to visit dormitories where Gulen's students live have been denied permission. He

rarely grants interviews, and his long-term goals are unclear. This movement may be, as its sympathizers insist, a benign force that stabilizes Turkish life. But some Turks mistrust it, and their suspicion deepened when it turned out that one of the journalists arrested in March, Ahmet Sik, was about to publish a book about its rising influence called *The Imam's Army*. Police confiscated advance copies. The text, which among other things alleges that Gulen sympathizers dominate the Turkish police, quickly appeared on the Internet, setting off what one blogger called "a frenzy of downloads."

The popularity that propelled Erdogan to his remarkable victory at the polls in June derives from his personal charisma, his astute blend of religious devotion and old-style Turkish nationalism, his party's unrivaled organizational skills, and the failure of opposition parties to provide a credible alternative. His most important asset, however, is the economic boom over which he has presided. The best way to see what this boom has meant to ordinary people is to visit cities in the interior. A generation ago, no one would have imagined that dusty Anatolian outposts like Konya, Denizli, Malatya, Eskishehir, Kayseri, and Gaziantep would one day become rich, but that has happened.

While I was in Turkey I rode a new train—it is faster than any in the United States—from Ankara to Eskishehir, 150 miles westward. Until a decade ago, Eskishehir was little more than an oversized village. A swampy stream that runs through town emitted a nauseating stench, and after heavy rainstorms, rotting houses along its banks would flood or collapse. Now Eskishehir is home to two thriving universities and dozens of plants that produce aircraft engines, locomotives, farm machinery, cement, chemicals, refined sugar, and even meerschaum pipes. The creek has sturdy stone walls, leafy parks line its banks, and trams run along main streets. Tourists arrive by the thousands from Ankara and Istanbul every weekend, eager for river tours aboard Amsterdam-style boats and Venice-style gondolas. There are half a dozen theaters, and an opera company brings Verdi and Donizetti to an increasingly sophisticated population. Students fill bars and clog the streets at night.

The mayor, Yilmaz Buyukersen, a former university rector, told me that while some other Turkish cities are not as open to pastimes like late-night drinking, he has no doubt that Eskishehir represents Turkey's future. Like many Turks who are not part of the ruling party or the Gulen movement, though, he worries about what is happening in Ankara.

"Reading the newspapers depresses me," he said. "Everything is about accusing, arguing, fighting."

> There is pressure on the press, on labor unions, on professional organizations, on NGOs, on universities. The justice system responds to the ruling party. All of this creates fear in people's minds. But I'm still optimistic. The new generation is aware of everything, open to the world, and totally in favor of freedom and democracy. Journalists and others

are resisting the pressure they're under. There is absolutely no going back.

Regional differences are still stark in Turkey. Kurdish towns like Hakkari, where there has been little public or private investment, remain poor. Schools churn out students drilled in rote memorization and unaccustomed to critical thinking. The unemployment rate has climbed to a troubling 11 percent. Chauvinistic nationalism remains strong. Many newspapers serve political causes and private interests rather than reporting news.

One of Erdogan's most tantalizing campaign themes was his pledge to promulgate a new constitution to replace the undemocratic one imposed by generals three decades ago. This will set off debates on questions ranging from free speech to headscarves to Kurdish nationalism. Erdogan has made no secret of what he wants from a new constitution. Party rules forbid him from seeking a fourth term as prime minister, so his dream is to replace parliamentary democracy with a presidential system like the one in France and then run for the presidency himself, perhaps in 2014, when the next presidential election is expected to be held.

Under Turkey's weighted electoral system, Erdogan's party won 326 seats in the 550-member parliament. This was far short of the 367 that would have allowed him to push through whatever constitution he wished, and also shy of the 330 that would have allowed him to call a referendum on a draft of his own. So his triumph at the polls was mixed and his authority is not absolute. Turkey has great potential as a twenty-first-century power, but can only fulfill it by reuniting its own fragmented society.

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