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Secularism and Islam in the Republic of Turkey

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This study addresses the contemporary rise of political Islam, embodied in the Justice and Development Party, in the Republic of Turkey and the conflict of this rising power with the established political elite which has supported a fiercely secular agenda since the founding of Turkey. Through an exploration of the history of political conflict between secularism and Islam in modern Turkey, a pattern of political repression on the part of the Turkish military and political elite can be discovered. This historical pattern is seen to carry on into the present conflict between Turkey's Islamist Justice and Development Party and the General Staff of the Turkish military. Furthermore, a study of the Justice and Development Party's record of achievements disproves many of the claims made by the military regarding the threat that Justice and Development poses to the future of Turkish democracy. The results of this study demonstrate that the rise of the mild Islamist Justice and Development party constitutes an insignificant threat to Turkish democracy and demonstrates that the illiberal policies of the Turkish military and secular political elites likely constitutes the greatest threat to Turkey's future.

**Introduction:**

The contemporary Republic of Turkey holds an interesting and unique position in the Middle East. Where many governments of the region are closely tied in with the religious traditions of Islam, the nation of Turkey was founded on secular, Western values embodied in the Kemalist philosophy. Kemalism is a political philosophy named after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, and also the nation's most celebrated hero. Kemalism has been defined in various and often conflicting ways, but under any definition one of the central elements of the philosophy is the secularization of society.<sup>1</sup> Secularism is commonly understood in the West to refer to the separation of the institutions of the state from the religious institutions of the nation. In Kemalism, however, this definition of secularism has been significantly expanded. Rather than enforce a simple separation of religion and state, which implies that neither the religious institutions nor the state should interfere in the other's affairs, Kemalism asserts the primacy of the state over religion and encourages state control of religion. To this effect, Kemalism advocates the banning of any religious tradition that places moral restrictions upon the individual, the family, or social activities.<sup>2</sup>

This political tradition has resulted in a Westernized and atypically (in the region) secular society which exists under the watchful gaze of the Turkish military, the self-appointed custodians of Atatürk's secular legacy. This self-perceived guardianship has resulted in four coups and military interventions against the sitting government in the 30

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<sup>1</sup> Karal, Enver Ziya. "The Principles of Kemalism" in *Atatürk: Founder of a Modern State*. edited by Ali Kazancigil and Ergun Özbudun, C. Hurst and Co. Publishers Ltd. 41 Great Russel Street, London WC1B 3PL, 1981. P. 22

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

years between 1960 and 1980. The stated goal of these military actions has primarily revolved around the need to preserve the secular government against encroaching Islamic influence.<sup>3</sup> In the years since the most recent military takeover in 1980 the Turkish republic has flourished. But the rising tide of political Islam across the Middle East since the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention of 2001 in Afghanistan and that of 2003 in Iraq has given rise to the fear of mounting Islamic fundamentalism in Turkey.

The rising tide of political Islam in the region has not left the secular Turkey untouched. In the two most recent elections the moderate Islamist Justice and Development (AK) party has succeeded in winning the dominant position in Turkey's political hierarchy. In 2002, the AK party took 34% of the vote which made it the dominant power in parliament and paved the way for Recep Tayyip Erdogan to ascend from the AK ranks to the post of Prime Minister.<sup>4</sup> This trend continued on July 22, 2007, when AK improved upon its stunning performance, taking 47% of the vote, thus allowing AK to again rule alone.<sup>5</sup> The ascendance of the AK party has greatly disturbed the secularist hardliners in the military who, in on-line statements threatened the possibility of a coup against Erdogan's government in response to his nomination of

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<sup>3</sup> ,Sakallioglu, Umit Cizre. "Parameters and Strategies of Islam-State Interaction in Republican Turkey." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol 28, No2, (May 1996) 231-251. P. 236, 239

<sup>4</sup> "Presidential Troubles, Again" *The Economist* (online edition), \_ August 16, 2007  
Recovered from <http://www.economist.com/world/europe/PrinterFriendly.cfm>? On October 10, 2007. In Turkey, parties that poll less than 10% of the popular vote are not given seats in the Grand National Assembly. Rather, the seats of the assembly are divided between those parties that receive greater than 10% of the popular vote. This is significant because, as was seen in the case of AKP, a party can receive a majority of seats in parliament and form a single-party government without winning an absolute majority of the popular vote.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Interestingly, AK Party's share of seats in parliament actually decreased due the inclusion in 2007 of a third political party in parliament which had not passed the 10% threshold in the 2002 elections.

Abdulla Gul, who is known to have somewhat Islamist leanings, for the Presidency in April of 2007.<sup>6</sup> Gul's election to the presidency, which occurred in August of 2007 despite the military's threats, gives the AK party control of not only the parliament and the post of Prime Minister, but also the Presidency, which the military commanders assert will pave the way for radical reforms by Islamic fundamentalist that would spell the end of Turkish democracy and secularism.<sup>7</sup>

Many outside Turkey's borders also appear to be worried by the rise of the AK party to such a dominant position in Turkey. This is evidenced not only by the lack of any sort of strong condemnation of the Turkish military's interference in the elections from America or Europe but also by the sheer number of articles on this topic which have appeared in the pages of *The Economist*, *Time Magazine*, *Foreign Affairs*, and any number of a dozen other prominent publications since mid-April of this year. The concerns evoked by the possibility of a hard-line fundamentalist government along the lines of that found in Tehran are only natural, given Turkey's strategic location atop the Bosphorus straits and its proximity to several areas of great tension such as Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria. Additionally, the thought of the Turkish military, which is the second largest in NATO behind the United States,<sup>8</sup> receiving orders from a fundamentalist Islamic government should rightfully frighten not only Western policymakers but also Turkey's regional neighbors. Despite the debate that rages around the question of what to do about Turkey's new-found Islamism, the most important

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<sup>6</sup> "The Battle for Turkey's soul" *The Economist* (online edition), May 3, 2007  
Recovered from [http://www.economist.com/opinion/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story\\_id=9116747](http://www.economist.com/opinion/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=9116747) October 10, 2007

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, P. 2

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, P. 1

questions still remain unanswered. Why has the AK party been so successful in the past two elections? Does this success constitute a threat to the Turkish democracy as the military asserts it does? What does this success mean for the future of Turkey's democracy? Therefore, the purpose of this study is to show the claims of the military to be totally unfounded, that there is little evidence at all to support the claim that the Justice and Development party harbors a secret Islamist agenda to turn Turkey to fundamentalism and Shari'a law, and indeed that the Turkish military itself poses a greater threat to the future of Turkish democracy. Before we can explore this, though, we must first understand the history of this conflict between Islam and Kemalist secularism in order to understand how the current antagonism between political Islam, in the embodiment of AK, and the Kemalism of the Turkish military came to be.

### **The Sources of Turkish Secularism**

The history of Turkey's democratic tradition, and as a result, the history of the secular/Islamic conflict, begins not with the 1922 founding of the Turkish Republic as might appear logical, but rather, it must begin roughly two hundred years earlier during the last centuries of the Ottoman Empire. Traditional theory states that Islam is all encompassing, commanding every aspect of society, culture and politics.<sup>9</sup> This all-encompassing ideology served as the foundation upon which the Ottoman Empire was built. The role of Islam was critical in the Ottoman Empire, providing legitimacy to the ruler due to his dual role as not only Sultan, the ruler of the imperial state, but also as

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<sup>9</sup> Pfaff, Richard. "Disengagement from Traditionalism in Turkey and Iran" *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 1. (Mar 1963) pp 79-98 P. 80

Caliph, the title given to the leader of the world-wide Muslim community.<sup>10</sup> Islam also ensured the loyalty of the populace due to the tradition of a universal Muslim community under the rule of the Caliph that had extended all the way back to the Prophet Muhammad who founded the Muslim faith and who served as the first Caliph. Lastly, it provided a common political and cultural identity to the people of the Empire.<sup>11</sup> Within this system, Shari'a law, the Islamic religious law, is meant to act as the solitary set of laws for the Islamic community, presiding over private life, public affairs and the dealings between tribes and nations. Being that there is no separation between religion and the political administration of the nation under this belief system, the role of the Sultan, as Caliph, was to uphold and enforce Shari'a and propagate Islam within the empire and abroad.<sup>12</sup> During the later years of the empire's reign, though, Shari'a law and traditional Islam lost much of their power and influence over the empire due to reforms carried out by various Sultans.

This reduction of Shari'a power is the result of the realization on the part of the Ottoman Sultans that it had become necessary to supplement Shari'a law due to its inadequacy for government over such a large and politically and economically active empire.<sup>13</sup> The Ottoman empire encompassed many ethnicities, including significant Greek, Kurdish, Armenian, Arab, Persian and Turkish populations. It also contained within its borders many religious communities, including orthodox Sunni Islam, heterodox Shiite Islam, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Catholicism, and many

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, P. 79

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid P. 81

small, tribal religions and sects.<sup>14</sup> Many of the minority religions and ethnicities were unwilling to submit to Shari'a law and had to be dealt with in a separate manner, requiring the establishment of non-Islamic legal codes for those communities.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Shari'a law was inadequate to the demands placed upon it by the growth of international trade that flowed into the empire. The prohibition of usury and other "standard" tools of commerce greatly handicapped Ottoman merchants and was difficult to adapt to foreign trade. This led to the introduction of supplementary laws through the decree of the Sultan which dealt with those areas in which Shari'a was incompatible with the needs of the empire.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, reform-minded Sultans, in particular Sultan Selim III (1789-1807), saw a great need to adopt aspects of European society and actively attempted to Westernize the Ottoman Empire in order to make it better able to compete with the Western powers which had dealt a series of painful and humiliating defeats to it during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>17</sup> These reforms included the restriction of Islamic law within the community to apply only to Muslims and the establishment of secular courts.<sup>18</sup> More important for Turkey's future development, these reformers took measures to bring Western intellectual influence into the empire's administration in order to modernize and bring efficiency to the bureaucracy and military.<sup>19</sup> This would prove vitally important in the development of a liberal movement within the empire that would

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<sup>14</sup> Zurcher, Erik J. Turkey A Modern History 2005 I.B. Taurus & Co Ltd. 175 Fifth Avenue New York NY 10010, USA

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Pfaff, 81

<sup>17</sup> Lewis, Geoffery Modern Turkey Praeger Publisher's Inc. 1974, 111 Fourth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10003. P 40-41

<sup>18</sup> Zurcher 61

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 23-24

provide the basis of the power for later democratic reformers who often arose from the military or bureaucratic ranks. This Westernization of the bureaucracy was accomplished through the hiring of European instructors to teach in the administrative and military academies of the empire and through the establishment of new embassies in Europe, the staff-members of which returned to the empire with Western ideas and cultural insight.<sup>20</sup> Of course, only the political elite and the officers of the military would benefit from this Western thought and innovation, and because of this the reforms were often poorly tolerated by the peasant and religious classes.<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that these reforms served to create a divide between the Westernized and educated elite and the lower class that is still visible in Turkey today, and that has greatly influenced the politics of modern Turkey.

Following the disastrous defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, the above mentioned Westernized elite came to play a large role in the formation of the new nation of Turkey. The reforms of the Sultans had been inadequate to save the Empire from decay, and under separatist pressures from within, conservative reaction to the reforms and the drain placed upon the empire by the massive mobilization of the first world war, the Ottoman Empire all but collapsed.<sup>22</sup> The allied powers forced humiliating concessions upon the Sultan in a series of peace settlements that threatened to dismantle the empire and deliver its lands to the victorious powers, Russia, Italy, France, Greece

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<sup>20</sup> Shaw, Stanford J. History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey Volume I Empire of the Ghazis. Cambridge University Press. 32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA, p. 265

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, Geoffrey, 57

<sup>22</sup> Kili, Suna “Kemalism in Contemporary Turkey” International Political Science Review Vol 1 No 3(1980) 381-404. P. 383



and England.<sup>23</sup> The result of these humiliating concessions and the military occupation by the Entente was to ignite a widespread nationalist spirit, resulting in the appearance of a number of resistance movements that dedicated themselves to keeping their land out of Western hands and to the development of a new Turkish state.<sup>24</sup>

These resistance movements were brought together under Mustafa Kemal, later to be named Atatürk (father of the Turks), the legendary hero of the Battle of Gallipoli who's defiance there had saved Istanbul from British occupation during the First World War. As the heroic leader of the struggle for independence, Atatürk was quickly acknowledged as the leader of the fledgling republic and assumed the post of President.<sup>25</sup> Supported by the remainder of the Westernized Ottoman bureaucracy, Atatürk, who himself had been educated in the Sultan's military academies and exposed to the ideas and culture of the European instructors<sup>26</sup> immediately embarked upon a program of secular reform that would forever alter the political and cultural landscape of the Turkish state.<sup>27</sup> The position of the Caliphate, which had survived the fall of the Sultanate in the person of Abdülmecid, was abolished in March of 1924.<sup>28</sup> Shortly thereafter, all of Turkey's religious schools or *medreses* were placed under the direct control of the secular Ministry of Public Instruction which closed them within a few days of assuming control, thus secularizing all education in the nation.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, a Directorate of Religious

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<sup>23</sup> Lewis, Geoffrey, 64

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. P. 65

<sup>25</sup> Rustow, Dankwart A. "The Army and the Founding of the Turkish Republic" *World Politics* Vol 11 No. 4 (July 1959) 513-552. P. 515

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis, G. 75

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, P. 92

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, P. 94

Affairs was established which assumed jurisdiction over all mosques and clerics. In April of that same year, this new directorate was responsible for the abolition of the religious courts and also for the repeal of the traditional Islamic ban against the use of intoxicating substances.<sup>30</sup> Combined, these actions represented a direct assault upon Islam and its influence over Turkish society by the Westernized elite that had assumed leadership of the nation. In the rural countryside, however, where the peasants had never been exposed to the education of the Sultan's military and bureaucratic schools, these edicts were greeted with hostility and violence quickly ensued.

In February 1925, armed rebellion broke out in the Kurdish lands in eastern Anatolia near the city of Diyarbakir. Though the rebellion was short, it carried with it consequences for the relationship between Islam and state that are still influential today. Though it is likely that the leadership of the rebellion were motivated by a desire for Kurdish independence, the common peasants who took up the fight were motivated largely by the abolition of the Caliphate and the anti-Islamic proclamations that followed it. This is evidenced by the demands for the restoration of the Shari'a courts and the Caliphate that were issued by the rebels during the conflict.<sup>31</sup> The republican government played down the influence of Kurdish nationalism in the rebellion, focusing its response on the danger of reactionary Islamic influence instead, and used this as justification for further action against traditional Islam in the nation.<sup>32</sup> Kemal and the nationalists feared Islam for being a rallying point for their enemies and a force that would impede their

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, P. 95

<sup>31</sup> Zurcher, 169-171

<sup>32</sup> Lewis, G. 97-98

plans for the future of Turkey.<sup>33</sup> Because of this, the political use of Islam was declared high treason.<sup>34</sup> This was justified by evidence presented to a military tribunal that stated that the leadership of the rebellion had attempted to exploit Islam in order to sow insurrection and reinstate the Sultanate.<sup>35</sup> The institution of this new modification to the high treason law proved disastrous not only for the influence of Islam in the nation but also for the nation's movement toward liberalism and democracy. Under the pretext of defending the nation against treasonous citizens, a large crackdown against politically active members of the religious community was instituted with the net result of 7500 arrested for their religious stance, 660 of which were executed for treason.<sup>36</sup>

This law also eliminated much of the political opposition to Ataturk's Republican People's Party (RPP) and resulted in roughly 20 years of authoritarian, one-party rule. During this time, Ataturk and the RPP launched yet another major offensive against Islamic influence in society. Decrees during this time included the condemnation of traditional Ottoman and Muslim clothing such as the Fez, the Turban and the veil, and instead encouraged the wearing of European styles of clothing. Additionally, Ataturk went on to encourage the abandonment of many other Muslim traditions such as the reverence paid to the tombs of holy men, which were officially closed to the public in a law that also disbanded the dervish orders (religious fraternal orders) of Turkey.<sup>37</sup> Also under these reforms, family law was officially secularized, and religious marriages and

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<sup>33</sup> Mango, Andrew. Turkey in the Middle East Journal of Contemporary History, Vol 3 No. 3 The Middle East (July 1968) P 225-236. P 228

<sup>34</sup> Zurcher, 172

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, P. 173

<sup>37</sup> Lewis, G. 104

polygamy were outlawed, thus eliminating the last effects of Shari'a upon the common person.<sup>38</sup> These actions again incited a great deal of unrest amongst the populace which resulted in the hanging of many outspoken critics who were deemed to be guilty of using Islam for political purposes.<sup>39</sup> The primary goal of the nationalist movement in instituting these reforms was to undermine the power of Islam in the nation, and instead, to empower the central authority and alter the culture of the nation so as to Westernize and secularize it.<sup>40</sup> Though, on the surface, the RPP elite appeared to have great success in this endeavor, events that followed the end of the Second World War would show that this cultural change was primarily cosmetic in nature. Beneath the thin veneer presented by the Westernized, cosmopolitan elite, Turkish society remained conservative, religious and largely unchanged from the time of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>41</sup>

## **Turkish Politics Since World War II**

In the years since the finalization of the Kemalist reforms the political history of Turkey has largely been the history of a conflict between the secular, Westernized and wealthy elite on the one side and the conservative, religious and poor segments of society that were largely unaffected by the political and military reforms of the late Ottoman Empire on the other. With the conclusion of the Second World War, Turkey came under increasing pressure from the allied nations, especially the United States, to liberalize its political system. The end result of this pressure was the democratization of Turkey's political system in 1950. Four times since 1950 political parties that have appealed to and

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<sup>38</sup> Zurcher, 173

<sup>39</sup> Lewis, G. 106

<sup>40</sup> Kili, Suna 384

<sup>41</sup> Mango, Andrew, 228

drawn their support from the traditional and religious sector of society have risen to power through democratic elections. Each of these parties has come into conflict with the military and secular elite and has been the target of interventionist military action.

As mentioned above, this pattern began with the 1950 elections in which the moderate Islamist Democratic Party (DP) won 408 of the 465 seats in the Grand National Assembly. The Democratic Party did not put forth a radical political agenda. In reality, the DP political program differed very little from that of the Republican People's Party (RPP) which had held power under the leadership of Kemal Ataturk for the previous 20 years. The DP, however, promised the people that the harsh repression of Islam would be curtailed and demanded that Islam be given greater respect and that the government interfere less in the affairs of religion.<sup>42</sup> Though these promised changes were very vague and only moderate in their scope, they inspired large segments of the population to rally around the DP.<sup>43</sup> The Islamic call to prayer was again allowed to be performed in the traditional Arabic language, religious instruction reentered the school curriculum,<sup>44</sup> the tombs and shrines of saints were reopened, the sale of religious literature was again allowed and the number of schools for the training of clergy was increased.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, the dervish orders also reappeared after the 1950 elections and government owned radio stations were allowed to broadcast readings from the Qur'an.<sup>46</sup> The result of this tolerance toward Islam, as well as a strong push to develop the countryside, was to

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<sup>42</sup> Margulies, Ronnie. Yildizoglu, Ergin. "The Political Uses of Islam in Turkey" *Middle East Report*. No. 153, Islam and State. (Jul.-Aug. 1988), 12-17. P 13

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. P. 13

<sup>44</sup> Szyliowiez, Joseph S. "Political Participation and Modernization in Turkey." The Western Political Quarterly, Vol. 19, No. 2. (Jun, 1966) 266-284. P 277

<sup>45</sup> Zurcher, 233

<sup>46</sup> Lewis, G. 143

even more firmly consolidate rural support behind the DP as evidenced by the 1954 elections in which the DP gained an even larger majority in parliament.<sup>47</sup> The relaxation of the Kemalist policies of secularism, however, along with the loss of power that resulted from the great appeal of the Democratic Party infuriated the military and the members of the secular RPP.

In the eyes of the Kemalists, the Democratic Party had betrayed the republic through the relaxation of Ataturk's reforms and the encouragement of Islam and traditionalism.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, by attempting to address the concerns of the rural peasant class such as development of the countryside, the DP had given real political power to the lower classes for perhaps the first time. This undermined the power of the urban elites and the military, and through the years of DP rule, relations between the DP and the Kemalist old-guard became increasingly hostile.<sup>49</sup> This increasing hostility between the parties and personal dislike between Menderes, the leader of the DP and his RPP counterpart lead the DP into direct conflict with the military commanders, resulting in the coup of May 1960 in which the DP was removed from power by the Turkish military and forever banned from political practice. Subsequently, a military junta seized control of the bureaucracy.<sup>50</sup>

In October of 1961, democratic elections were again held, though under the watchful gaze of General Gursel who assumed the presidency during the aforementioned coup. Weak and shifting coalitions ruled the government until October 1965 when the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, P. 146

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, P. 149

<sup>49</sup> Szyliowicz, 278

<sup>50</sup> Zurcher, 241

Justice Party (AP), which many saw as the direct successor of the Democratic Party, won nearly 53% of a general vote.<sup>51</sup> AP was successful in this election because, in the same way that the Democratic Party had done, it won over the rural voters with appeals to religion and tradition and gave voice to the concerns and demands of the Turkish lower class.<sup>52</sup> These policies, the pro-Islamic stance in particular, made the AP nearly as unpopular amongst secularists as was the Democratic Party before it, and its success once again infuriated the military.

In March of 1971 the Chief of the General Staff of the Turkish military delivered an ultimatum to the prime minister demanding that the structure of the government be changed to eliminate the traditional influence. The alternative he presented was that the military itself would take action and replace the government. As a result, the prime minister, Demirel, was forced to resign his position and was replaced with a representative of the right-wing of the RPP.<sup>53</sup>

In the years between the 1971 intervention and 1980, the RPP maintained control over the government but was unable to maintain a sizable majority over a collection of smaller parties that arose to replace the banned Justice Party. It was forced to rule through a series of weak coalition governments that proved inadequate to deal with the nation's economic woes and the increasing political violence of the 1970's which erupted between various communist and nationalist movements that battled for supremacy across the nation.<sup>54</sup> When the Iranian revolution occurred in 1979, bringing to power a hard-

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, P. 251

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Zurcher 258

<sup>54</sup> Paul, Jim "The Coup" *Merip Reports* No. 93, Jan 1, 1981 p. 3-4. P 3

lined Islamic government who's support of revolutionary movements in the region threatened to destabilize Turkey and her neighbors, the military felt it necessary to take action. On September 12, 1980 the Turkish military once again assumed control of the nation, removing the democratically elected government from office and again installing a council of the senior generals as the primary authority.<sup>55</sup>

As in the coup of 1971, it became clear nearly from the beginning that the junta intended a return to a democratic system of government, though it also became apparent that the generals wished to enforce radical changes upon the Turkish government before they handed control back to the politicians.<sup>56</sup> All political parties were abolished and all members of the Grand National Assembly as well as all mayors and members of municipal governments were dismissed from service.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, in the year following the coup, over 122,600 arrests of possible political dissidents were made. These arrests succeeded in greatly reducing the violence that had been instigated by the communist, nationalist and separatist movements of the 1970's but also resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of numerous innocents including clergy, journalists, and professors. In the following two years 3600 executions were carried out.<sup>58</sup> Finally, on November 7, 1982 the military instituted a new constitution, replacing the previous version.<sup>59</sup> Throughout the remainder of the 1980's a slow return to liberalism occurred, with the civilian government gradually retaking control from the junta. By 1989 the military had lost much of its grip on the civilian government due to amendments to the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 4

<sup>56</sup> Zurcher, 278

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 279

<sup>58</sup> Zurcher Op. Cit. 279-280

<sup>59</sup> Ibid 281



1982 constitution and the passing of legislation which allowed many of the parties and individual politicians who had been banned by the military to return to political practice.<sup>60</sup>

In the elections of 1995 political Islam again came to a position of power with the rise of the *Refah Partisi* (Welfare Party) as the largest party in parliament. The Welfare Party, like its successors the Democratic Party and the Justice Party, owed its success to its appeal to the poorest segments of Turkish society.<sup>61</sup> The Welfare Party again gave the least powerful segments of society a political voice by opposing the Kemalist's policy of Westernization and protection of large business concerns.<sup>62</sup> It did this by introducing measures to protect and strengthen trade unions and by removing barriers to political activism on unions and religious organizations.<sup>63</sup> The growing political power of *Refah Partisi* again alarmed the secular establishment due to appeals made to Islam and its attempts to empower the common Turk<sup>64</sup> and in 1997, shortly after coming to power, the Welfare Party found itself the target of yet another military intervention. The military issued a list of demands to the party leadership that were officially aimed at eliminating the influence of Islamists in the educational system, in the bureaucracy, and in the economy.<sup>65</sup> The Welfare party, however, was uncooperative with these demands and in response the military, large business concerns and secular members of the judiciary banded together to mobilize segments of the population against *Refah Partisi* and to place great strain on the Welfare party's ability to control the coalition government that it

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, P. 284

<sup>61</sup> Gulalp, Haldun "Globalization and Political Islam: The Social Bases of Turkey's Welfare Party" *Middle East Studies* Vol 33 (2001) 433-448. P 434

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, P. 435

<sup>63</sup> Zurcher, 297

<sup>64</sup> Gulalp, 434

<sup>65</sup> Zurcher, 300

presided over. This resulted in the desertion of junior members of Welfare's parliamentary coalition and eventually resulted in the downfall of the government. Shortly thereafter the military called upon the secularist parties in parliament to form a coalition government which was tasked with implementing the demands of the army, and quickly outlawed the deposed Welfare Party.<sup>66</sup>

### **The Rise of Justice and Development Party to Power**

In the elections of 2002 the mild Islamist Justice and Development party, under the leadership of Recep Tayip Erdogan manage to seize the largest share of the electorate and became the largest single party in parliament. AK was successful in its 2002 election bid because it was able to establish a wide base of support that had not been seen for any single political party in nearly fifteen years. It appealed not only to the religious and the traditionalists of Turkey, but also found support in the moderate middle class and even in sections of secular Western Turkey that had opposed Islamism in the Welfare party of the 1990's.<sup>67</sup> AK was able to build this base of support across Turkish society for a number of reasons. First, despite being a relatively young party, having been founded only in the five years between the fall of the Welfare Party from power and the 2002 elections, the AK party was, due to its moderate stance on the economy and pro-Western outlook, highly successful in attracting not only members of older Islamist parties, but was also able to attract established and well-known politicians from the ranks of many of the non-religiously aligned centre-right parties that had been active during the two decades

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, P. 302

<sup>67</sup> Mecham, R Quinn. "From the Ashes of Virtue, a Promise of Light: The Transformation of Political Islam in Turkey" *Third World Quarterly* Vol 25, (2004) No. 2 339-358. P 352

following the 1980 coup.<sup>68</sup> The addition to the AK party of these well known political figures who had been drawn from outside the pool of established Islamist politicians that had made up the Welfare Party, logically served to enlarge the portion of the population that AK would appeal to, thus contributing to AK's success.<sup>69</sup> In addition to this, AK also successfully mobilized large sections of the rural population and the urban poor which served as the traditional base of support for Islamist parties in Turkey. AK contained within it a powerful grassroots movement that built support village by village and neighborhood by neighborhood in the model of the movements of previously successful Islamist parties.<sup>70</sup> Because of this grassroots movement, AK was responsive to the needs of the common Turk and contained an internal process of democratic decision making within the party through primary elections for the party's list of candidates and open debate on the party's policies. This internal democracy was important to AK's success because it served to incorporate the voters into the decision making process.<sup>71</sup> Thus, AK was able to not only broaden its appeal through moderating the Islamist message, but also to retain the support of its traditional base by giving voice to the needs and concerns of the common people. AK also made clear that it supported a market economy in Turkey, as opposed to an Islamic interest-free economy, that it would push heavily for Turkish entry into the European Union and that it would fight for a greater respect for religion and support moral values but only through means appropriate to a secular democratic state. This served to broaden the party's appeal amongst secular

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, P. 351

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

voters as well.<sup>72</sup> AK also benefited heavily from the political and economic climate of previous years that had motivated many voters to seek change during the 2002 elections.

For the 15 years prior to the 2002 elections, no single party had gathered enough support to rule without the assistance of a coalition government in parliament.<sup>73</sup> The weak coalition governments of this period and the constant infighting that attended them, along with the worldwide economic downturn of 1999, resulted in an economic crises in Turkey. During this period rapid inflation began to place a strain on the budgets of many Turkish households,<sup>74</sup> and a nine percent contraction of the economy put nearly 1 million Turks out of work.<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile repressive legislation and accusations of extensive corruption within the ranks of the political elite became commonplace.<sup>76</sup> The people blamed these woes on the corrupt and the ineffective governing coalition that many believed was allowing the people to suffer while plundering the economy to fill their own pockets.<sup>77</sup> This too strengthened the AK party's bid for office. The people wanted to see change in the ineffective political leadership of the nation, and Erdogan's AK party appeared to be the best available instrument of change. At the time of the 2002 elections, Erdogan was remembered as the practical mayor of Istanbul who had gone to great lengths to improve the living conditions of the many poor immigrants who were flooding into the poorest neighborhoods of the city and also as a strong supporter of small

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> "Erdogan Triumphs With Plenty of Help From His Enemies" *The Economist* Vol. 365 (11/9/2002) p.53-53. P 53

<sup>74</sup> Mecham 340

<sup>75</sup> Bay, Fang "Turkey's Islamic Challenge" *U.S. News and World Report* Vol. 133 Issue 18 (11/11/2002) p.29. P 29

<sup>76</sup> Erdogan Triumphs, 53

<sup>77</sup> Fang, 29

businesses in the city.<sup>78</sup> This history as a champion of the poor and of small, private businesses, made Erdogan, and by proxy the political party that he had founded, an ideal candidate to replace what many saw as the corrupt and self-serving political regime of the 1990's.

Justice and Development's moderate political agenda combined with a widespread mistrust of and lack of satisfaction with the established political powers brought AK an unprecedented victory in 2002 with nearly two-thirds of the seats in parliament.<sup>79</sup> This success would be built upon in the elections of July 2007 despite heavy resistance from the military and secular establishment. In the elections, AK increased its share of the popular vote by a wide margin.<sup>80</sup> AK accomplished this feat by attempting to soothe the fears of many secular Turks who do not wish to see Turkey governed by the tenets of Shari and Islam. AK has attempted to distance itself from the rhetoric and policies of other Islamist parties, describing itself as moderate and conservative while vowing to uphold the basic premises of secularism.<sup>81</sup> It has also taken many measures to liberalize the economy and defend human rights and has made the strongest attempt in the nation's history to gain accession to the European Union, an attempt that has required massive liberalizing reforms that have served to move the nation even farther from the much feared system of Sharia rule.<sup>82</sup> Additionally, Erdogan's

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<sup>78</sup> Rainer, Hermann. "Political Islam in Secular Turkey" *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* Vol 14, No. 3 (July 2003) 265-276. P 273

<sup>79</sup> Mecham, 352

<sup>80</sup> Peterson, Scott "Economy Trumps Religion in Turkey" *Christian Science Monitor* (Jul/24/2007). P 6

<sup>81</sup> Haqqani, Husain "Embracing Tolerance and Tradition: Turkey and Islam." *The International Herald Tribune* (Aug 24/24/2007) P 6

<sup>82</sup> Zakaria, Fareed "A Quiet Prayer For Democracy" *Newsweek (Atlantic Edition)* Vol 149 Issue 20 (5/14/2007) p.27

leadership has brought the economy out of the economic recession that he inherited from the previous administration and has attracted billions of dollars in foreign investment, easing the financial pressures that motivated many poor Turks to vote for AK in its first showing.<sup>83</sup>

### **Does AK Rule Constitute a Threat to Democracy in Turkey?**

The results of the 2007 elections show that the measures taken during AK's tenure have been sufficient to sway a large portion of the Turkish people to the support of AK. But the popularity of AK has not settled well with the military high command. The generals assert that the Justice and Development party is only instituting liberalizing reforms in order to gather support while hiding a secret Islamist agenda that would be slowly implemented in order to break down the nation's secular tradition and return the nation to Islamic rule under Shari'a.<sup>84</sup> The arguments of the army are largely based on small and isolated incidents in which mayors and other regional political figures have attempted to create alcohol-free zones within their jurisdiction and an abortive attempt by Mr. Erdogan to outlaw adultery.<sup>85</sup> All of these attempts were quickly abandoned with little public support.<sup>86</sup> The two-thirds majority that AK retained in parliament last July gives it the capability to alter the constitution without resorting to compromise with other political parties. In the past, secularists had counted on the aging president Ahmet Necdet Sezer who's strong secular stance and veto ability had prevented AK from making

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<sup>83</sup> "A General's Election: Turkey's Future" *The Economist* (May/12/2007)

<sup>84</sup> Zakaria, 27

<sup>85</sup> "Secularists Lament" *The Economist* (Sep/29/2007)

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

constitutional changes.<sup>87</sup> But, with Sezer being replaced in office by AK's Abdulla Gul in August, the presidential veto seems unlikely to hinder future revisions to the constitution. This is especially worrisome to the secular establishment because Erdogan has issued statements saying that AK is in the process of planning a new constitution which would replace the constitution of 1982 which had been enacted by the junta after the 1980 coup. Included in this planned constitution are a number of reforms meant to liberalize Turkey's secular stance, including a provision which would scrap the ban of the Islamic women's headscarf in public buildings.<sup>88</sup> The reformation of the constitution is certainly a case for close study and the issue of the headscarf in particular has long engendered passionate debate in Turkey, but the AK party's past record does little to support the military's claims of hidden Islamism. In answer to these claims Justice and Development can boast that it has established one of the most liberal and democratic governments in Turkish history due to a number of liberalizing reforms.

### **Minority Rights Reform**

Erdogan's government has been responsible for a major push for Turkish accession into the EU and has instituted many liberalizing reforms in order to meet the Copenhagen criteria, and has pushed for greater civil rights for minorities, especially the long suffering Kurds of Eastern Anatolia.<sup>89</sup> AK has introduced legislation which calls for reparation payments to Kurdish citizens who were displaced from their homes during the

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<sup>87</sup> Khan, Adnan R. "Fighting for the soul of Turkey" *Maclean's* Vol 120 Issue 35/36 (9/10/2007) P.40-41. P 40

<sup>88</sup> Secularists Lament

<sup>89</sup> Matthews, Owen. Kohen, Sami. "Sliding Backwards; An ugly nationalist mood is brewing in Ankara, stalling once hailed re-forms." *Newsweek* (April/24/2006) P 1

conflict between with the PKK,<sup>90</sup> and has also introduced legislation which allows the Kurdish minority to broadcast and teach in their own language, an act which has been against Turkish law for generations.<sup>91</sup>

### **Legal System Reform**

Also, in attempting to meet the criteria for acceptance into the European Union, AK has pushed through many legal reforms. Included in these reforms are the abolition of the death penalty throughout the nation, the abolition of State Security Courts (military courts which were used to try civilian cases), the replacement of harsh press and assembly laws with more liberal versions, and the institution of a new penal code which does away with much of the gender discrimination that was found in the former penal code.<sup>92</sup> Specifically, the new penal code has abolished the possibility that a man convicted of rape may have their sentence reduced or eliminated if they agree to marry the victim, recognizes marital rape as a criminal act, and redefines sustained domestic abuse as torture, which is punishable with a harsh sentence.<sup>93</sup> In addition to abolishing the State Security Courts which had been notorious for human rights abuses, the new penal code includes the right for all detainees to see an attorney immediately upon arrest, thus eliminating the time between arrests and assignment of an attorney during which the worst abuses occurred.<sup>94</sup> The new code also institutionalizes the statement that

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<sup>90</sup> Amnesty International “2005 Country Report: Turkey” Retrieved from <http://web.amnesty.org> 11/13/2007. P 2

<sup>91</sup> Matthews & Kohen, 1

<sup>92</sup> Amnesty International 2005 Turkey Report, 1

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 4

<sup>94</sup> Freedom House “Freedom in the World- Turkey (2005)” Retrieved from <http://www.freedomhouse.org> 11/13/2007

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punishment should be proportionate to the crime, contains much stricter provisions against torture, and eliminates sentence reductions in cases of traditional “honor killings.”<sup>95</sup>

### **Military Reforms**

Erdogan’s government has also endeavored to reduce the oppressive military presence in the nation and a tighten civilian control over the military. First, the National Security Council (NSC), formerly a highly influential policy forming body composed of the military’s high ranking officers has had its role revised to make it a purely advisory body under the jurisdiction of the civilian government. Appointments to the NSC are now dependent on the decision of the Prime Minister and approval of the president rather than upon the consensus of the generals, thus allowing civilian politicians to sit in oversight as members of the NSC. Additionally, the role of the NSC in political affairs was confined to recommendations on questions of national security only.<sup>96</sup> Members of the NSC must now be accountable to the civilian government and are no longer able to deny the government’s requests for information regarding NSC activities.<sup>97</sup> The capacity of the NSC to oversee other governing bodies has also been eliminated; the positions of NSC representatives on the Supervision Board of Cinema, Video and Music, on the High Audio-Visual Board, and on the High Education Board have all been eliminated, thus eliminating the military’s influence over education and information.<sup>98</sup> Finally, the reforms have improved the budget transparency of the military, requiring that detailed

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid

<sup>96</sup> ,Naril, Ayse Nilufer. “Aligning Civil-Military Relations in Turkey: Transperancy Building in Defense Sector and the EU Reforms”. P 164

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 165

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 167

budget information be provided to the civilian government, and also gives the civilian Court of Audit an increased ability to inspect accounts and assets held by the military.<sup>99</sup>

### **Religious Reform**

None of these reforms constitute “creeping Islamism,” which the Military often accuses AK of encouraging. Instead, these reforms are aimed at Westernizing the nation in order to bring the nation’s legal standards into line with the requirements of admission into the European Union. Even the primary justification for the military’s concern, specifically the planned repeal of the headscarf ban, represents not a return to fundamentalism but rather another step toward liberalism. Under the current law which bans any woman who wears a headscarf from entering a public building, many pious women are suffering discrimination due to their religious beliefs. Female students have been banned from classrooms for refusing to remove their head covering, and female nurses, lawyers and other civil servants have been fired or refused employment for wearing the headscarf.<sup>100</sup> Given that the current headscarf ban is discriminatory in nature, it is difficult to accept the Turkish military’s claim that a repeal of the headscarf ban and an end to this religious discrimination would constitute an attack on the nation’s secularism. Rather, eliminating the headscarf ban represents yet another step on the part of the AK government to democratize and liberalize the nation.

### **Military Response**

As mentioned earlier, the reforms instituted by AK have been aimed at

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 168

<sup>100</sup> U.S. Department of State “International Religious Freedom Report 2005” Retrieved from <http://www.state.gov> (11/13/2007)

harmonizing Turkish law with the requirements for accession into the EU, not at a return to Shari'a. This being true, we must seek other explanations for the Turkish military's attack on AK. In light of the aforementioned reforms, specifically those reforms regarding the role of the Turkish military, it becomes apparent that the true dispute between the military and AK government is not the threat of creeping Islam as the military claims. Rather, the antagonism between AK and the military is the result of the loss in power that the Turkish military has experienced over the past five years due to Erdogan's reforms. As stated above, the AK government has taken steps to eliminate the policy formation role that the military once played, has limited the scope of its advisory capacity, has given the power to appoint new members to the National Security Council to the civilian government, taking it out of the hands of the generals, has removed the military overseers from panels responsible for oversight of education and broadcasting, and has forced greater transparency upon the military, limiting its ability to conduct operations without civilian oversight. These actions have reduced the Turkish military from a major political power with great influence over policy, education and information dissemination that underwent very little civilian oversight to a body with influence only over matters of military security and which is largely excluded from the domestic affairs of the nation.

The generals, who have been the nation's ultimate authority since Ataturk's time, as evidenced by the long string of coups and interventions between 1950 and 1997, are not pleased with this loss of power. As a result of this rising displeasure, on April 27, 2007 Turkey's top general issued a thinly veiled statement warning that the Turkish republic was under threat from Islamic fanatics and that the military stood ready to step in

if necessary. Many saw this as an attempt to bring down the AK government in the model of the intervention that removed the Welfare party from office in 1997.<sup>101</sup> Unlike its predecessor, however, Erdogan's government held a great deal of public support. This support allowed AKP to resist the demands of the military successfully. Rather than accept the military's demand to cease in his attempt to have Abdullah Gul elected to the presidency, Erdogan called early elections, as a result of which, on July 22, 2007, the AK party won a stunning victory.

## **Conclusions**

In this essay I have discussed the origins of Turkish secularism in the reforms of the latter Ottoman Sultans and have shown how these reforms lead to the development of a Westernized elite due to the exposure of high ranking members of the military and civil bureaucracy to Western thought in the Sultan's educational system. I have then shown the long history of repression on the part of this elite toward the traditional and religious segments of society through repressive legislation and also through numerous coups and interventions against democratically elected governments. Finally, I have shown that the recent claims made by the Turkish military against Erdogan and the Justice and Development party are completely unsupported by AK's record of liberal reforms. Rather, AK has established a strong record of positive reform.

It must be concluded from this study that the threat posed by the Justice and Development party to the future of Turkey's democracy is insignificant. When one views

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<sup>101</sup> A General's Election (The Economist)

the list of reforms that have gone into effect under the rule of the Justice and Development Party it becomes apparent that the military's claims of a secret Islamist agenda are totally unfounded. AK's first term in office resulted in a strong record of liberalizing reform, strengthening of the economy, and a reduction in the military's power over the civilian political structure, and there is little evidence to show that this trend is changing. The new constitution which AK plans to enact appears designed to bring further liberalism to the nation. Included in the current plan are provisions meant to expand civil rights and freedom of expression, to lessen tensions between the Kurdish minority and the Turkish majority, and to further strengthen civilian control over the military.<sup>102</sup>

Despite this, there are still legitimate fears to address. For the first time since the changeover to democracy in 1950, one political party holds the presidency, a majority in parliament and also the post of prime minister. This has many people feeling uneasy due to the lack of checks on the growing power of AK.<sup>103</sup> Also, although Erdogan's government has a record of expanding and protecting the civil rights of female citizens, and includes in the planned constitution the abolition of the headscarf ban, some women are worried over the removal of a clause from the current constitution that states that the Turkish state is responsible for preserving gender equality in the nation.<sup>104</sup> In addition the planned constitution continues to include some of the illiberal language of the current constitution, especially troubling is the inclusion of the infamous article 301 which has

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<sup>102</sup> Abramowitz, Morton. "Toward the Point of No Return" *Newsweek International Edition* (10/29/2007). p. 1

<sup>103</sup> Khan, 41

<sup>104</sup> Secularists Lament (The Economist)

been used to prosecute and imprison a number of journalists over the years on charges of “insulting Turkishness.”<sup>105</sup> Despite these misgivings, it seems obvious that the largest current threat to the future of the Turkish democracy is not the AK government, but rather, the largest threat to Turkey’s democratic future is the Turkish military and its continued policy of interference in the democratic process.

It has been well documented in this study that the Turkish military has a long history of authoritarian action. In the years since the democratization of the Turkish political system, the military has launched a total of five coups and interventions resulting in the fall of four democratically elected governments, the arrest of well over 100,000 political dissidents and at least 3600 executions.<sup>106</sup> This record of undemocratic action leads up to and includes the April 24 “e-coup” as it is being called, which initiated the most recent political crises in Turkey. In addition to this, Amnesty International, a well respected civil rights watchdog groups, blame the Turkish military, and judiciary, both elements of the secularist “old guard,” for resisting the liberalizing reforms of the AK government and slowing the pace of additional reforms.<sup>107</sup> In its 2005 *Country Report of Human Rights Practices in Turkey*, the U.S. Department of State also criticizes the military and judiciary, citing numerous acts of corruption and abuse within the Jandarma (rural police under military jurisdiction). The report also states that the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors was widely criticized for undermining the judicial process and cites the police and judiciary for limiting freedom of expression. Finally, this

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<sup>105</sup> Secularists Lament (The Economist)

<sup>106</sup> Zurcher 279-280

<sup>107</sup> Amnesty International 2005 Country Report: Turkey,

report cites secularists in the military and judiciary for limiting religious freedoms.<sup>108</sup> In contrast, the international watchdog group Freedom House praised Erdogan's government for its increased control over the military and upgraded Turkey's score on its annual freedom index in response to these changes.<sup>109</sup>

In total, the rise of the Justice and Development party to prominence in Turkey has marked a new era of liberal reform. If Erdogan and AKP stick to the course that they have followed since coming to power, the 2007 elections could mark the flowering of the first true liberal democracy in Turkish history. Obstacles remain, however, as further reforms limit the power of the generals it will become increasingly likely for more conflict to erupt between the military and civilian leadership, but the overwhelming popular support that AK has enjoyed has served so far to insulate it against much of the military's power and should continue to do so in the near future. If AKP is capable of overcoming both the military and the fundamentalist aspirations of some segments of its own constituency, Turkey will stand prepared to serve as a vital stabilizing factor in the Middle East and as a model for Islamic democracy that avoids repression of Islam and also avoids the religious extremism that is prevalent in the governments of many nations of the region.

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<sup>108</sup> U.S. Dept of State 2005 Country Report, P. 3-8

<sup>109</sup> Amnesty International 2005 Country Report: Turkey, P. 1