



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“Turkey’s Political Crisis: Implications for the Middle East”
2212 Rayburn House Office Building, 2:00 pm, July 24, 2008

The Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) held a discussion regarding the current political crisis in Turkey and the potential consequences for Turkey, the broader Middle East, U.S. relations with the region, and prospects for democracy. Panelists included **Abdullah Akyuz**, President of TUSIAD, the United States office of Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen’s Association, **Bulent Aliriza**, Senior Associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and Director of CSIS’ Turkey Project, and **Omer Taspinar**, Professor of National Security Strategy at the U.S. National War College and Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution where he directs Brookings’ Turkey Project. The discussion was moderated by **Stephen McInerney**, POMED’s Director of Advocacy.

McInerney opened the discussion with a brief look at the progress toward democracy in Turkey in recent years, Turkey’s role as a model for democracy elsewhere in the Middle East, and the current political crisis, which began with the announcement in March of a case before the Turkish Constitutional Court to ban the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) for violating Turkey’s secular political system and traditions. A decision in the case is expected as early as next week.

Omer Taspinar argued **the current crisis is more complex than a struggle between secularists and Islamists, but is in fact a power struggle between elites**. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) is the agent of a “new elite,” composed of the rising pro-globalization middle class. The anti-AKP forces represent Turkey’s old guard and are composed secular, statist Kemalists. Those seeking to oust the AKP are driven by an authoritarian, hypernationalist ideology based on the perceived threat posed to the Kemalist state by political Islam and Kurdish nationalism. However, according to Taspinar, these forces have shifted away from coups to the courts due to the AKP’s popularity and the division of the military. He said the military’s division is between those that strongly support democracy, are western-oriented, and accept civilian control, and those that fear Islamization and are impatient with democracy.

Regionally, Taspinar stated that the banning of the AKP would have effects on the future of democracy in the Middle East. He stated that even though the Bush administration should not have presented Turkey as a model of Islamic democracy, it has become an experiment in whether moderate Islam and democracy can thrive. This case has ramifications on the Middle East because the AKP has become the model for moderate Islamists, such as those in Egypt and Jordan. **These groups are looking at Turkey’s situation to see if democracy works and whether they can come into power by moderating and moving to the center.** The outcome

may influence whether Islamists see moderation or violence as their political vehicle to power.

Abdullah Akyuz stated that at the beginning of the AKP's rule it was able to win over liberals, businessmen, and the international community by improving the economy, introducing political reform, and continuing talks with the EU. However, over the last three years the AKP has slowed down the reform process, especially political and constitutional reform, and instead focused more on its religious agenda. Akyuz stated that despite the recent political tensions in Turkey, **the AKP is the product of a Turkey that has become more transparent, democratic, and economically integrated with the rest of the world.**

Akyuz said that the AKP must consolidate itself in the center by focusing on democratic reforms rather than narrow religious interests. However, the AKP's opponents must realize that the party is not a temporary phenomenon and should not be understood as such. According to Akyuz, **the AKP will play a crucial role in Turkish politics for the foreseeable future and banning it would be counter to irreversible political, demographic, economic, and social trends that are changing Turkish society.** He concluded by saying that there needs to be accommodation between the AKP and their opponents with the AKP being integrated into the political system and both sides seeing secularism and democracy as equally important.

Bulent Aliriza stated that the current crisis was a very important moment in the history of the Republic, as a ruling party that won nearly half the nation's vote could be banned through judicial means. However, Aliriza said even if banned they would reconstitute themselves and would ride their popularity to another electoral victory. Aliriza sees **the fact that the AKP must be pushed out through judicial means as evidence of Turkey's secular system no longer being able to adjust in an ad hoc manner to the growing religiosity of its people.** Another important systemic change could result from the Ergenekon case as it will indicate whether the Turkish military will give up its role as guardian of the country and accept civilian control.

Aliriza claimed that the political crisis would also have international implications since after September 11th the Bush administration cited Turkey as a model for a modern Islamic democracy. The AKP took this seriously in order to demonstrate that they could work with the Arabs and the West. Aliriza contended that the EU and U.S. had reacted differently to the crisis with the EU suggesting accession talks would freeze if the party were banned and the U.S. responding much less forcefully. However, compared to past crises in Turkey, what the U.S. is saying is less important as Turks see this as a situation that must be resolved internally. **The biggest fear, according to Aliriza, is that if the party is banned and EU talks are suspended, Turkey's integration into the West may be threatened.**