



## TURKEY'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION REVIVES BATTLE BETWEEN RELIGION AND STATE

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*Turkey's parliament canceled presidential elections Wednesday, adding to a political crisis that has isolated the ruling government from its people, who hold sacred the country's secular tradition.*

The political turmoil also is raising uncertainty over Turkey's position as a link between Europe and Asia, where the Western and Islamic worlds meet.

Turkey is a nation of Muslims -- 99.8 percent of Turks follow the Islamic faith -- but its government has been largely secular since its creation in the 1920s.

Turkey's first president, army officer and World War I hero Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, built the country from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, allowing women to vote, restricting Islamic dress and removing Islam from its constitution, creating a strict separation between religion and state.

Now, moves by the ruling Justice and Development Party, known by its Turkish initials "AK," have troubled Turks who fear that the AK Party's Islamist roots, a philosophy that advocates the spread of Islamic values, may emerge.

### **Candidate sparks outrage**

The crisis began last month, when the AK party named Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul as its candidate for president.

The nomination sparked outrage from the secular establishment -- including the powerful Turkish army, political opposition parties, the courts and the Turkish middle class.

Some 1 million Turks protested in Istanbul and Ankara, Deutsche Presse-Agentur reported, fearing that the AK Party could exercise a hidden Islamist agenda, which its leaders have denied, once it holds control over the parliament, the prime-ministership and the presidency.

Turkish citizens vote once every five years for members of the 550-seat parliament, the Turkish Grand National Assembly, which holds legislative power. Executive power is shared between the president, who is appointed by parliament to a seven-year term, and the prime minister, who is appointed by the president.

Current secularist president Ahmet Necdet Sezer, whose term began in 2000 -- before the rise of the AK party -- has used his veto powers as a check on the AK-led parliament, blocking legislative bills and appointments of officials.

But with an AK-backed president, those checks could disappear.

### **Fears of rising Islamism**

"[Gul] does not represent democracy, or Turkey. His wife wears the veil, which I don't appreciate, and I don't believe he intends to follow Ataturk's ideals," Iffet, a Turkish citizen, told BBC News.

Both Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and AK Party No. 2 Gul have tried to distance themselves from their Islamist pasts, but their party has been criticized for easing restrictions on teaching the Quran, inserting religious references in textbooks and taking steps to ban alcohol consumption and criminalize adultery.

"In order to appeal to a majority of people, AK will have to convince them that the party does not have an Islamist agenda," Dogu Ergil, a political science professor at Ankara University, told Reuters.

Erdogan has maintained that secularism should not come at the cost of religious expression.

"The essential problem is to find a way to stay united, preserving our differences. Rights and freedoms are necessary for everybody," Erdogan said, BBC News reported.

### **Reversing progress**

"We would have preferred the campaign to be about structural reforms, the Turkish lira, and Turkey's relations with the EU. Now the main focus will be the secular-religious clash and the role of the army," Atilla Yesilada, a political analyst with Global Source/Turkey, told the Wall Street Journal.

Many Turks fear that threats from the army could undo the financial and diplomatic gains of the past four and a half years.

Under the AK, Turkey has seen unprecedented economic growth following a near-collapse in 2001 which discredited politicians of the previous legislative session.

And after years of bargaining, Turkey entered formal talks to join the European Union in 2005, a credit to the country's foreign minister, Abdullah Gul. But the European Commission warned Turkey that it could not gain entry into the EU while its military holds so much power over its democratically elected government.

The new clashes also could have implications for democracy in the Middle East. President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair have argued that Prime Minister Erdogan's government could serve as an example for its Middle Eastern neighbors -- Iraq, Iran, Syria -- for how a democracy can exist in an Islamic country.

### **Opposition from the court and army**

Following Gul's nomination to the country's top post in April, the opposition Republican People's Party boycotted the election. The country's constitutional court then overturned Gul's election -- a first in Turkey's history -- leading to Gul's withdrawal from the race Sunday.

With no candidate in place, the AK Party halted the presidential election process Wednesday, saying it would only continue after the July parliamentary elections, which it had already moved forward in the hopes that it could lessen the erosion of its power as opposition parties merge.

"The key is whether the current dissatisfaction will be translated into votes at the ballot box," Semih Idiz, a columnist at Turkish newspaper Milliyet, told Reuters.

The Turkish parliament has taken steps toward a major constitutional amendment that would allow the president to be elected by a vote from the people instead of the legislature, but critics say that could only further disrupt the checks and balances in the nation's constitution.

"Whether it is a president elected through parliament or a popular vote, you can't do this hastily. There needs to be a period of contemplation so that we don't have to change the system soon again," Dogu Ergil of Ankara University told Reuters.

And fears of a military coup remain.

The army, as stewards of the secular state, has intermittently overthrown governments it believes to be too Islamic -- most recently in 1997. Last month, it released a statement accusing the AK government of tolerating rising Islamist activities, hinting it would intervene should a pro-Islamist rise to the presidency.

*-- Compiled by Adnaan Wasey for NewsHour Extra*

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