The Challenges of Turkish Democracy

1. Introduction

Turkey has more than fifty years experience of democracy since its first free elections were held in 1950. This is a relatively long experience, particularly when compared to those states comprising the so-called ‘third wave’ of democratization beginning in the mid-1970s. Nevertheless, democracy in Turkey has been interrupted a number of times, and remains fragile. Turkey’s democracy is not yet consolidated—when democracy is ‘the only game in town’ (Linz)—but its development gives considerable cause for hope. This paper examines the key challenges to consolidation.

The three dimensions of democracy identified by Diamond, Linz and Lipset\(^1\) allow us to structure this examination. Those three elements are, in brief: the extent of political competition for government office; the level of political participation in that competition; and the degree of civil and political liberties that makes that competition genuine. While the first two are easily measured and institutionalized, the third encompasses the social and attitudinal context within which political activities take place. In the Turkish case, these elements may be translated into the following list: the role of the military; the place of Turkish nationalism; the role of Islam and the secular state; the place of civil society; and the role of external factors, including the prospect of EU membership.
2. Historical Background

The history of modern Turkey begins in 1923 with recognition of the republic under Atatürk. The transition to multi-party politics began in 1945, with the approval of Kemal’s Republican People’s Party (RPP)—whose monopoly rule was only ever identified as temporary—and the military, when an opposition Democrat Party (DP) was formed. The DP won government in free parliamentary elections in May 1950. But democratization has not been a smooth road. The Democrat Party—seemingly aiming for single party rule—was overthrown in a military coup in May 1960. Yet power returned to civilians in the 1961 elections, under a new constitution.

There have been four military coups or interventions into politics: 1960, 1971 (sometimes described as a ‘half coup’), 1980, and 1997 (a type of ‘soft’—or ‘post-modern’—coup, where military pressure forced the resignation of the Welfare Party-True Path coalition government, and new elections). The military’s continuing political influence was demonstrated by its very public displeasure in 2007 at the Parliament’s election of Abdullah Güll as President, though the military refrained from a coup when the result was endorsed by an election.

Despite the military’s interventions, the formal institutions of democracy are reasonably robust. The electoral system has produced ‘free and fair elections’ over a long period, with political parties that organize interests and policies. A constitution, chiefly based on one drafted by the military but adopted by popular referendum in 1982, and a commitment to the rule of law, provide institutions that resemble those of most liberal democracies. There are, however, some differences, notably a lack of clarity in the meaning of terms such as ‘national security’, and where certain freedoms
are constitutionally protected. Associations, for example, cannot have ‘prohibited objectives’ (Article 30 of the Law on Associations) or be ‘in contravention of law and morality’ (Article 56).

Elections to the Grand National Assembly, Turkey’s unicameral parliament, have a high voter turnout, and their administration is endorsed by external auditors as ‘transparent, professional and efficient’. There is a high degree of independence of judges. Legislation is subject to judicial review to determine its constitutionality, through the Constitutional Court. A free press has developed, particularly since a constitutional amendment of 1993 broke the state monopoly of radio and television broadcasts. Of course, formal institutions are not the entire story of a democracy. And there are other issues to consider. For the EU there remains a number of central concerns: about the limits to civilian oversight of the military, of its interventions into public debates, its judicial role, and its budget; about the independence and impartiality of the judiciary; about the extensive nature of corruption; and about the protection of human rights.

Concerns about Turkey’s democratization can be seen in the many formulae that have attempted to capture what is significant about its experience. Turkey has been described, for example, as a ‘delegative’ democracy; as ‘functioning if imperfect’; as ‘an unconsolidated “procedural democracy”’; and—because of the military’s role—as a ‘protected democracy’.

3. Role of the Military
Ahmad argues that the Turkish military’s role, as standing ‘above society’ and acting ‘independently of it’, continues the role of the military in Ottoman times.
intervened first in Turkish politics in 1960, but its key role in drafting the 1961 Constitution—and particularly the creation of the National Security Council (NSC) which, at that time, it dominated—meant a type of dual rule. After its coup of 1980, the military drafted the Constitution of 1982 under which it allowed a return to civilian government, but in which it retained a privileged place by virtue of the NSC. In the years that have followed, and under pressure from politicians and the EU, the military representation on this committee has fallen to a minority. But the military has power by virtue of its arms, not simply its numbers on a committee. It has demonstrated that power in recent times by merely threatening a coup: in 1997 and 2007.

On two issues—secularism and Kurdish separatism—the military has had a decisive say in Turkish politics, for both of them offend against the views of Atatürk, of which the military sees itself the ultimate guardian. It may, however, be that the military’s view of a secular Turkey, where religion (that is, chiefly Islam) is a private matter, and overt displays of religion in public buildings is forbidden, takes too restrictive a view of the line between public and private. After all, the ‘separation of church and state’ in the West means that there is no religious test for public office, not that public officials cannot display their religious symbols when they are in office. The issue of Kurdish separatism involves both the role of the military and the nature of the political community in Turkey. Any proposed ‘Kurdistan’ poses a serious challenge to the national security of Turkey. But this issue has been used by the military as sanctioning a free hand in these matters, and it has on occasion moved against Kurdish terrorists without waiting for government direction. The Kurdish issue is a
very difficult one for Turkey, but its ultimate resolution is likely to be political, not military.

While the military constitutes a major barrier to the further consolidation of democracy in Turkey, it has strong legitimacy, partly by virtue of being ‘broadly representative of the society as a whole’ and by its support of Kemalism. The military’s self-perception as the guardian of national unity, as against the competition of political parties, finds a resonance in the public mind, both because of the self-seeking and venality of many politicians, and because the public is uncomfortable with public dissent and division.

4. Turkish Nationalism

Creating a political community is essential to a democracy: ‘Before the people can decide, we must decide who are the people.’ Indeed, in an extensive society a political community is a place in which there is a level of respect and trust between people who are otherwise unknown to, and perhaps different from, each other. The moral regard that people in such a community have towards each other is essential for politics to succeed.

There seems to be a contrast between Turkish nationalism, which is very strong, and the creation and maintenance of political order within the multi-ethnic, multi-religious community of modern Turkey. Nationalism serves to diminish the depth of contestation in the Turkish polity, because it sees contestation from non-Turk and non-Muslim citizens as a challenge to the existence of the polity itself. This restricts the comfort zone within which issues can be legitimately discussed.
The sensitivities of Turkish pride find expression, among other places, in Article 301 of the 2005 Turkish Penal Code, which makes it an offence to denigrate ‘Turkishness’. This Article was used in 2005 to charge Turkey’s Nobel-prize-winning author, Orhan Pamuk, when he talked in an interview about the deaths of Kurds and Armenians in 1915, though legal proceedings against him were dropped in January 2006. It was also used to prosecute the Turkish journalist Hrant Dink, for expressing views on historical issues; Dink was assassinated in January 2007. Laws such as Article 301 undermine the rule of law, because their content is subject to arbitrary interpretation.

The defensive nature of Turkish nationalism has meant that the expression of the cultures of minority communities has been curtailed. Broadcasting in languages other than Turkish is now permitted, but use of other languages in political life is illegal. Turkish is the only language permitted to be taught in public schools, and since 2004 the teaching of Kurdish in private schools was prohibited.¹³

Ironically, Atatürk’s view was that Turkish nationalism should be a civic nationalism, a conscious act of citizenship, and that use of the term ‘Turkish’ is also a civic term, denoting citizenship regardless of ethnicity or religion (as outlined in the 1924 Constitution). Heper insists that the present Prime Minister is also an advocate of civic nationalism.¹⁴ The continuing construction of ‘Turkish’ and ‘Kurdish’ identities, however, suggests a level of differentiation between these ‘brother’ peoples that has deep roots. It also suggests that Turkish governments have not succeeded in welcoming Kurds into the economic and other developments of Turkey.
5. The Secular State and Islam

The maintenance of a secular state is one of the key issues on which the Turkish military is prepared to intervene in politics. Secularism is an important issue in countries where Islam is the majority religion, and many see it as a fundamental challenge to developing a modern democracy. For democracy requires that there is a separation between public and private spheres of life, whereas one widespread interpretation of Islam sees no room for such a division.

The key issue that has emerged in recent times concerns how far the state’s secular commitment—no established religion, and no religious test for public office—can coexist with religious practice and explicit religious display by public officials (and their closest family members).

The leaders of the current ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), who are under notice from the military about their religiosity, are nevertheless moderate Muslims who seem not to present a challenge to the modernization or democratization of Turkey. Indeed, they have been champions of further integration with the EU, and all the obligations that imposes on the Turkish state to conform to rule of law and human rights standards (even against public opinion).

There has been an increase in recent times of those Turks who identify as ‘totally religious’ (34 per cent in 2007; up from 28 per cent in 2006). Yet it is clear that most Turks also believe that religion should be a private matter, with the survey question ‘Sharia should be our government model’ receiving a grade of 2.42 (where 1 is ‘don’t
agree at all’ and 10 is ‘totally agree’).\(^{15}\) There does not seem to be deep support for the end of the secular state and the introduction of Shari’a law.

6. Civil Society

Democracy is made possible, but not inevitable, by the separation of state and civil society. This means that the state must be able to maintain order, and civil society is the place where people can excel, achieve recognition and accumulate wealth. Power in a democracy is non-cumulative, so public officials within the state can govern, while individuals in industry, agriculture, the professions and so on can achieve influence in their sectors. Good governance is highly unlikely if the power structures of civil society overlap with those of the state. If the state is the main form of accumulation, this gives rise to clientelism, corruption, and the concentration of power into one party. Corruption clearly remains a difficult problem for Turkey. Transparency International’s ‘Corruption Perceptions Index’ for 2006 ranked Turkey 60 out of 163 countries with a score of 3.8 out of 10, where 10 is ‘highly clean’.\(^{16}\)

Historically, the state played a central role in the economy, both under the Ottomans, and then under the policy of state intervention by the Kemalists in the 1930s. In 1990, approximately one third of value added in manufacturing was contributed by public economic enterprises.\(^{17}\) Turkish economic life was dominated by state-owned industries, and an aversion to international economic engagement, until the Prime Ministership of Turgut Özal from 1983. He encouraged Turkish business to look to export opportunities; and began the process of privatizing state-owned industry. Yet the complacency and corruption of government were on sad display in the aftermath of the 17 August 1999 earthquake in Turkey that destroyed much of the city of Izmit.
Özel argues that the idea of the ‘daddy state’ was shattered on this day, when the avoidance of building codes was exposed, as was the inability or complacency of the civilian or military authorities to come to the aid of the people affected. The new AKP swept into government at the elections of 2002, campaigning against corruption and for the entry of Turkey into the EU.

The economic development of Turkey has been, in some periods, very impressive, but the development of an economic sector apart from the state (and its subsidies and other protections) has been more difficult. Economic privatization and a reduction of bureaucratic ‘red tape’ in private economic activities is nevertheless being slowly undertaken. A shift in preponderance from the central state would also be assisted by a greater role for, and autonomy of, local government, though one needs to be careful that powerful locals do not simply replace central patronage with their own brand of patronage. There are constitutional restrictions on voluntary associations that should be reduced or eliminated, but it should also be noted that the growth of civil society is ultimately a qualitative change in people’s reactions towards self-help and state-dependence. Civil society is as much about attitude as it is about organizations.

7. External Factors

Turkey is a member of the Council of Europe (from 1949) and NATO (from 1952), and has been a candidate country of the European Union since 1999, and has many other institutional links with Western-oriented multilateral bodies. All these are important links for its international relations. And despite the frustrations of the lengthy process of EU membership, the Turkish elite seems committed to it. This means considerable readjustment. An Accession Partnership Document (APD),
agreed in 2000, requires changes to Turkish laws and other institutions, and established a monitoring mechanism. The Turkish government responded by setting up a program in 2001 for meeting the objectives of the APD, including human rights and rule of law matters, and decreasing the power of the military.

Regular EU reports on Turkey’s progress towards establishing its ‘Criteria’ are not always positive. As the EU has said, for example, in the area of human rights: ‘prosecutions and convictions for expressing non-violent opinions, and actions against newspapers illustrate that the Turkish legal system does not fully guarantee freedom of expression in line with European standards’. But obstacles in the way of EU accession by Turkey are not simply the result of Turkey’s failure, or delay, to implement the required measures, but are also the result of EU uncertainty about its own identity and purpose.

8. Conclusions

Turkey has taken large steps on the road to a consolidated liberal democracy, but its institutional gains may be easily reversed. Perhaps this is because the process is not ‘owned’ by ordinary Turks, who see politics as remote from them. Turkish citizens have views, to be sure, on a whole range of domestic and international issues, but their level of political participation is low, confined largely to elections.

The attitudes required to consolidate democracy do not come about of their own accord; they require leadership that has a vision of a democratic future, is not thoroughly self-interested, and has the courage to confront a number of the challenges identified. It will require thoughtful and firm leadership to reconcile Islam and the
fundamentally secular state, to address corruption within the elite and insist on higher standards for public officials and higher expectations on the part of citizens, and to embody a confidence in Turkishness that does not fear anti-Turkish views.

Yet there are two good reasons to be positive about Turkey’s democratization. The first is that the experience of democracy, despite setbacks, continues. That sets powerful expectations of continuity. The second is that Turkey’s approach to its problems is—as Bernard Lewis argued—to stress the importance of modernization, not (as Iran, for example, has done) to turn its back on modernization and attempt a revival of ‘austere’ or ‘authentic’ Islam.  

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7 Ergun Özbudun, Contemporary Turkish Politics: Challenges to Democratic Consolidation (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000), 151–154.

8 F.S. Larrabee and I.O. Lesser, Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty (Santa Monica CA.: RAND Corporation, 2003), 26.


13 Commission of the European Communities, Turkey 2007, 22.


18 Özel, ‘After the Tsunami’, 89.

19 Commission of the European Communities, Turkey 2007, 15.