The controversies surrounding the Turkish elections should not be seen as a clash between secularists and Islamists, but rather as a struggle between various elites. In fact, the disavowal of its Islamist agenda has enabled the AKP to occupy the centre of the political spectrum formerly held by the Kemalist establishment. These shifts and turns have come at a price: nationalism and corruption seem to be on the rise. The author concludes that the real danger is that these power struggles will disable Turkey to develop its global, liberal democratic credentials.

Ironically, those who... tout the superiority of a secular European lifestyle are the least likely to appreciate the introduction of European-inspired liberal values...
will damage relations with the United States and the EU and potentially open the door to a regional conflagration between Turkey (a NATO country) and the Iraqi Kurds, whom Turkey accuses of aiding the PKK, possibly engaging the central Iraqi government and even U.S. forces. A Turkish incursion would give tacit permission for other neighbouring countries like Iran to enter the Iraqi quagmire ostensibly to hunt down their own terror candidates. The Turkish military, which does not like the AKP government, will continue to apply pressure, aided by the RPP and NAP. In the meantime, it continues to mass troops and equipment along the Iraqi border.

**Immediate and potential dangers**

A further aspect of Turkey’s politics of fear are the links emerging between ultranationalist violence and a group of former military officers. The alliance between Kemalist extremists and ultranationalists suspicious of religious and ethnic minorities runs deep. Evidence emerged in the 1980s and 1990s of something Turks call the “deep state,” a mysterious group of conspirators with connections high in the state and military bureaucracy that over many years funded and protected violent groups that killed Kurdish leaders, leftist intellectuals, journalists, judges, and other broadly defined “enemies of the state.” Recently links have been found between these former officers and suspects in the murder of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink and several other political murders over the past year. There also appears to be cross-fertilization between ultra-nationalists and fringe radical Islamists, the outlines of which are only now becoming clear.

While the more immediate threat to Turkish democracy appears to be coming from the secular camp, creeping conservatism, corruption and the dangers of political monopolization are legitimate causes for concern that are driving the campaign against AKP. People fear that the AKP will consolidate power over all branches of government, leaving no counterbalancing power. (The opposition RPP lost votes in this election and is widely viewed as lacking leadership or new ideas.) The AKP has disavowed Islam as a political ideology, yet contains under its broad umbrella a core group of committed Islamists who would like to ban the sale and consumption of alcohol in public places, hold conservative ideas about gender roles and are unwelcoming of women in the public arena or in positions of authority and power, and who are generally intolerant of secular lifestyles as Kemalists are of Muslim ones. Nevertheless, the AKP fielded more female candidates in this election than the RPP and the number of women legislators doubled to over eight percent. But conservative and nationalist influences have undermined the implementation and effectiveness of many of the liberal laws passed by the AKP as part of its alignment with EU requirements, particularly those broadening ethnic and religious minority rights.

The dangerous hot and cold games the EU has been playing with Turkey’s membership bid have exacerbated Turkish suspicions about Europe’s ultimate aims in the region, inflamed nationalist sentiment, and emboldened ultranationalists whose actions, in a self-fulfilling cycle, add to Turkey’s negative tally on the part of Europeans who do not wish to see the country join the EU. The United States also has been unwilling or unable to pressure Iraqi Kurds to stop the PKK from crossing into Turkey. In Turkey, this seeming disregard of Turkey’s own terror candidates is a threat to the secularist, westernized, but essentially illiberal establishment than an AKP harbouring a secret Islamist agenda. AKP has been successful where the old guard has not—at least not since the 1980s—in uniting Turkey’s fractious political field and occupying the centre. The establishment’s response has been to spread fear that secularist lifestyles are in danger and the nation is being undermined by foreign powers. The AKP has been forced to turn aside from its own reform agenda to prove itself to be as nationalist as its opponents. Nationalism has shown itself to be a dangerous force in the past, used to manipulate public sentiment that all too easily can spill over into violence. The real question is whether post-election Turkey can get back to the business of developing its global, liberal democratic credentials or whether the pre-election games of Turkey’s embattled elites will have damaged the social fabric and the democratic process to such an extent that Turkey’s old elite is AKP’s increasing ability to occupy the centre, where most Turkish voters’ interests lie. A popular and centrist AKP devoted to liberal values is much more of a threat to the secularist, westernized, but essentially illiberal establishment than an AKP harbouring a secret Islamist agenda. AKP has been successful where the old guard has not—at least not since the 1980s—in uniting Turkey’s fractious political field and occupying the centre. The establishment’s response has been to spread fear that secularist lifestyles are in danger and the nation is being undermined by foreign powers. The AKP has been forced to turn aside from its own reform agenda to prove itself to be as nationalist as its opponents. Nationalism has shown itself to be a dangerous force in the past, used to manipulate public sentiment that all too easily can spill over into violence. The real question is whether post-election Turkey can get back to the business of developing its global, liberal democratic credentials or whether the pre-election games of Turkey’s embattled elites will have damaged the social fabric and the democratic process to such an extent that Turkey’s future will be derailed.

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