

The ups and downs of democracy in Turkey

Tuesday 19 June 2007

Une Interview de Yüksel Söylemez

Question: Turkey could not elect a President. Was this not a minus, or a poor show, for Turkish democracy?

Söylemez: Well, some people may think that it was, but I beg to differ. It was the unprecedented revolt of the parliamentary minority against the heavy handed imposition of the parliamentary majority in power. Seen from that angle, it was an expression of democratic freedom of choice, and as such it was an historic event that can be described not as the impotency of the TBMM but as a example of Turkish democracy on the rise.

Question: What was the end result, then?

Söylemez: The end result was early elections or, as the AKP government likes to describe it, as earlier elections, though I fail to see the difference in legalistic or semantic terms. The arbitrary date of 22 July 2007 was decided against the will of the main opposition who petitioned unsuccessfully in the Constitutional Court but had to go along with it. Never in the history of Turkish elections, except for the one in July 1946, has there been an election in July, a most inconvenient and inopportune time.

Question: Why inconvenient and inopportune?

Söylemez: Because July is the middle of summer. Migrant workers are away from their homes for seasonal work elsewhere. In the hot south people move to higher and cooler mountain abodes, which we call "yayla". City folks will be by the seaside for their annual summer vacations. Thus the debate and suspicion will continue as to whether 22 July was not specially chosen by the ruling AK party for political reasons as being an advantageous date for them.

Question: Can the Constitutional Court be blamed for the Cankaya stalemate because of their decision that a quorum of 367 was required in the first round for the election of a President?

Söylemez: No they cannot. The TBMM majority, the AK Party, are themselves to blame for supporting their Speaker's ruling that 184 would be enough to elect a new president. By their ruling the Constitutional Court acted with their best judgement to promote democratic practice in Turkey, in line with public sentiment as much as legally and pragmatically.

Question: So what is the road ahead where a new President is concerned?

Söylemez: The Presidential system needs to be discussed and debated in the Turkish body politic instead of being rushed as a fait accompli, even in an early referendum. Some analysts think, and they may be right, that a change may lead to an undemocratic, not to say dictatorial, handling of power, so maybe we would be better served by staying with the present system of a figurehead president. It is also suggested that it will bring us back to the Ottoman system of the Sultanate, albeit by democratic elections. The political parties would determine one or two candidates for the presidency and this choice would be imposed on the people, to be described as "democratic". But Turkey is not the United States. We must wait to see if a referendum can be hurriedly included with the 22 July voting. If this is not the case, there will be question marks after the elections and the new parliament will have to choose the new President based on the old constitutional system.

Question: What about the stand of the military?

Soylemez. Within the last half century Turkish democracy has faltered with four and a half military interventions, in 1960, 1970, 1972, 1980 and 1997. In each and every case the military have made it clear that they are not interested in politics but clearly underlined that they believe in democracy in Turkey and that they were acting in good faith only to restore democracy with elections at the earliest date. The dramatic statement by the military in the middle of the night following the stalling of the presidential election reminded the party in power to stick to the founding principles of the Constitution, democracy and secularism, and not to stray from them. This in itself was an expression of their constitutional and democratic right to raise their voice. A worldwide poll agreed by 78% that the military statement did not harm Turkish democracy.

Question: Could the party in power benefit from the warning by the military by sorting out their problems with the Armed Forces and perhaps coming back after the elections with a bigger majority in the TBMM?

Soylemez: Yes, they might though, as they say, a week in politics is a long time and nothing can be taken for granted. There are still 7 weeks to go.

Question: But will the result ease the Islamist versus the secular divide which is the crux of the problem inherent in the Turkish body politicians most particularly in this crucial election?

Soylemez: For an answer we must wait and see the result of the popular vote. Personally, I am a great believer in the commonsense of the Turkish grassroots. I have seen 2 exemplary examples of it in our recent history. One, when Evren was president at the height of his popularity, just before the national election day in 1982, he mistakenly pointed out a retired general, Turgut Sunalp, as his personal preference for prime minister. But the people said "thank you for your advice" and instead chose the party of Turgut Ozal by a landslide. That was a true democratic choice. The second case was when Ozal was President and at the height of his popularity, he went on TV advising people not to forgive and forget the past which would thus enable Demirel and Ecevit to return to politics. People once again listened, but said "President Ozal, we thank you for your advice but we forgive them." That was inexperienced democracy on the rise in Turkey. Then people had enough of the Ecevit-Yilmaz-Bahceli coalition and out of dire protest brought the new AK Party to power in 2002 with 34.3% of the vote though with 65% of the parliamentary seats which is an anomaly neither fair nor representative of the wish of the majority outside parliament in the country, most of whom have therefore not been able to make their voices heard in the TBMM for the past four and a half years.

Question: Is not this election different in one major factor, in that it is being called the "Feminine Coup"?

Soylemez: Yes, this election differs from previous ones in that women, half of the population of Turkey, are now making their voices heard and could well tip the balance with their votes.

Question: So how do you see the outcome?

Soylemez: We have to wait until the polls close on 22 July. There are so many question marks. What about the rural women? Will they definitely vote in the established traditional way? What about urban women and all those who participated in the Tandoğan, Caglayan, Manisa, Canakkale, Denizli etc. protest meetings? Will they unite and vote en bloc?

Question: So what is in store for Turkey after the elections?

Soylemez: There are many as yet unknown factors: whether rural women will break their mould, whether urban women will stick to their tradition, how the undecided, or those who dislike all the choices, will vote. It remains to be seen how the opposition will vote, in what percentages, whether the opposition splinters or pulls together to tip the balance in the shape of two large blocs, the CHP-DSP election coalition and the

Democrat Party consisting of the united ANAVATAN and DYP parties. Will they among themselves be able to unite and push the AK party into opposition? If the opposition vote splinters into many other parties the result will only serve to the benefit of the AK Party and return it to power Thanks to the unfair and unjust Turkish electoral system, with the 10% ceiling, the winner takes most and the smaller parties merely get the crumbs.

Question: What is more important for Turkey, democracy or secularism?

Soylemez: This is the wrong question. There is no logic in it. It is like the question of the horse and cart, which came first. Let there be no mistake, there can be no true democracy without secularism, and there cannot be secularism without democracy. They are intertwined like Siamese twins. In 1928, when the first American Ambassador, Grew, presented his credentials at Cankaya, in a Columbia Pictures sound documentary Mustafa Kemal greeted Grew and uttered the historic words "By nature Turkish people are democrats." Democracy in Turkey based on the criteria of the ballot box is half a century old, but the rights given to women by Ataturk 70 years ago found their expression through the voice of millions asking for better representation. That voice is again being heard now in the election campaign, loud and clear.