

# Unnerving developments

Wednesday 27 June 2007, by [Dogu Ergil](#)

**Those were good days : there were the military and civilian bureaucrats that ran the state affairs and a small stratum of middle-class professionals that staffed the academia, media and Turkified (after the transfer of property and capital from minorities by various methods during and after World War I) business concerns that mainly lived under state protection.**

Then there were peasant masses that lived in poverty, isolation and in obedience to their traditional local leaders like the landlord and the religious sheikh. The “gentlemen’s agreement” between the central (ruling) elite’s traditional notables led to the firm control of the first over the state apparatus and freezing of change in the countryside (read this as the agrarian or main economic sector). Neither democracy nor economy grew fast enough to enable Turkey to catch up with the world. Retarded economic development and its authoritarian political system remain as two main fault lines that often disrupt Turkey.

That is what happened on April 27 when the army issued an “earthshaking” memorandum that denied the incumbent Justice and Development Party (AK Party) the power to elect the next president of the republic and forced the government to call for early national elections — originally due in November. Today Turkey seems to have no government in place. Everything seems to be fluid and uncertain.

Uncertainty is further exacerbated by exploding bombs that test the Turks and force them to choose between the “party of security” and the “party of democracy.” Then of course one has to account for the mass demonstrations staged by millions in major Turkish cities.

## A major social transformation

All of these facts indicate a stark phenomenon: Turkey is undergoing a major social transformation that is manifesting itself as the widening middle class that is searching for its place in the system, preempted by other social categories. The flipside of this transformation is the crisis of the system that was created by old elite that has a firm grip on the state and does not want to let go. This situation has not only led to an institutional chaos — fusion of powers and intervention in others’ turf — but also to a crisis of legitimacy.

The Constitutional Court changed the rules of presidential elections in Parliament although the same rules guided the elections of previous presidents. The armed forces declared that the incumbent AK Party is not allowed to have both the Prime Ministry and the president’s seat no matter what number of seats they have in Parliament.

Where do we stand now in terms of rule of law and democratic standards?

Only a few courageous people ask the question, knowing that they will not receive a potent and convincing answer. Yet journalists and commentators of different backgrounds start their arguments as if such extra-political interventions were only normal and we should start our discourse as a matter of fact following the intervention without questioning it.

We know that the old middle class relied on the state for its being and source of power. Today there are two other middle classes. One is the former peasants or small-town people who made their entry into the middle class by way of education and economic entrepreneurship. They are traditional and pious but dynamic and competitive. Their basic tenet is being self-employed and independent. Their social nexus in urban settings that they migrated to a generation ago is at best either a religious order or professional organization that reflects their traditional values.

The third middle-class category is the new professional and qualified service sector employees. They work in modern enterprises or recently born high-tech production and service concerns. They are well educated, but they do not have economic security (capital or self-owned businesses) or a traditional network (kinship group, tribal connection, religious or parochial community) to uphold and sustain them socially. They lead a modern individualistic life, but do not have confidence that they can maintain it with its consumption demands and the organizational power to safeguard the freedoms to carry on a multifaceted lifestyle. They are unorganized and lack community support. They shy away from political parties and despise most of the so-called "leaders."

The other, more traditional middle class has the economic power, but not the pluralist and multifaceted lifestyle they lead and yearn to preserve. The more modern (western in appearance and in leaning/yearning) middle class sees the more traditional one as a danger to its freedoms and a rival in the zone of activities it wants to occupy.

This threat perception makes the modern new middle class side with the old statist middle class in its worries, anxieties and the perception of a "better" society where traditionalism and unsavory varieties are either eliminated or non-existent. That is what makes them look less democratic and less tolerant, but more xenophobic and authoritarian. If that is a contradiction, it is a genuine home-made one.

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## **Sources**

Source : TDZ, 10.06.2007