

The existential crisis of the Turkish Military

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The Turkish Republic was founded by soldiers. Mustafa Kemal was a first class soldier before anything else. The Turkish military has always seen itself as the revolutionary, modernizing and progressive power of this country.

To some extent this has been true. Today, however, the Turkish military is going through an existential crisis. Atatürk had always pointed to the West and western values as the main direction to which Turkey should head. However, today's West, namely the European Union, means an end to the enormous powers and privileges that the Turkish military has long enjoyed in this country.

We have now quite different circumstances surrounding Turkey than just ten years ago. The Cold War is now long past and the United States has given up supporting dictatorial regimes in the Middle East, believing that these feed terrorism. Turkey is still a valuable partner for the West, no longer as the last bastion to the Soviet threat, but as a democratic secular model that can be an important player in the region.

A Kurdish state in Northern Iraq is at present a subject of tension between the U.S. and Turkey; and it seems this will continue to be so.

The Turkish military has a very solid and rigid understanding of a potential Kurdish state: *"A Kurdish state, wherever and whenever it appears, is a threat to the fundamental interests of Turkey and it should be prevented"*.

This is, of course, not the only threat perceived by the military. Most of the threats are coming from within, namely the Islamists and the Kurds who have been refusing to be assimilated !

The vision of the founding elite of the Turkish Republic was a classless, homogenous society that is Muslim but not too religious. There is a portrait of the ideal citizen in the minds of the Turkish elite and I would like to draw it for you : a white Sunni Muslim Turk who prays only on Fridays and drinks raki when he is not fasting. (Of course, he should not be drinking too much !)

Whatever goes beyond this white Sunni Muslim portrait has always been regarded as a threat to the homogenous society that the Turkish Republic has been trying to achieve. Thus the Kurds (if they assert their Kurdish identity), Muslims (those more religious than the elites wish them to be), Alevi and non-Muslims of this country are not the ideal citizens as they do not fit this portrait.

The problem is that this project, which overlooks the different identities of Turkish citizens and tries to create a homogenous society, has failed, and Turkish elites (both military and civil bureaucrats) have shown no willingness to change their understanding and conceptualization of Turkish society according to these new conditions. The founding elites of the Turkish Republic needed to forge a national identity in order to create a nation state and so the current elites continue to believe even today that the "nation", should act and react in accordance with their understanding and expectations of society, politics and religion, but not vice versa !

A project that is not uniting society

We have a fundamental problem here. This project is not uniting Turkish society anymore. Instead it is deepening the divisions, and constantly increasing the tension—between secularists and Muslims on the

one hand, and between Kurds and Turks on the other.

The two most recent electronic statements of the Turkish military, posted on 27 April and 8 June, both of which were clear and unacceptable interferences with the democratic process in Turkey, have the potential to fuel tension and conflict between different sections of Turkish society. The first memo declared that “everybody who does not express how happy he is being a Turk is an enemy”!

In the second memo people who criticize the nation state and who “use humanity’s esteemed values of peace, freedom, and democracy as a cover for terrorist organizations” were targeted. In addition, the “Turkish nation” was called to show “their reflex action”. These are extremely dangerous statements. They have no potential to unite the nation, but on the contrary, are provocative !

Turkey and her military are at the crossroads. This country will either aim at being a first class democracy, which I believe can lead to being a strong world power, or it will continue to act like an authoritarian regime. Of course, there will always be excuses for our defective democracy : “enemies”; “extraordinary and sui generis conditions”; “terror” (although its only solution is democracy); “the danger of Sharia”; and others.

Giving up power is very difficult. Doing it willingly is much more so! However, the Turkish military has two options. Either they will be the ruling elite of a third world country or they will be serving a nation who has a leading role in world politics. Now it is up to the military to choose between these two options for this country’s future. There is no third alternative !

Sources

Source : TDN, Friday, June 15, 2007