



Syndicated News

Turkey's Putin Deserves to Go

Posted 2008-06-06 08:34 GMT

Turkey's Putin Deserves to Go Istanbul -- Yesterday Turkey's constitutional court overturned a new law that would have allowed women in the secular republic -- established in 1923 by the Westernizing Mustafa Kemal Ataturk -- to wear Muslim headscarves in universities.

It now appears all but certain that this summer the court will go even further when it decides a larger case against the country's Islamic-rooted Justice and Development (AK) Party. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the AK stand accused of violating "the principles of a democratic and secular republic." Penalties could range from a suspension of the party's public financing to its disbandment and the suspension of its leadership from politics. Such a development should be welcome in the United States.

Some former U.S. diplomats argue that the court is antidemocratic. "The party's neutering would be a serious setback for democracy," wrote Mark Parris, a former U.S. ambassador to Turkey, on this page last month. Such sentiment, though, exculpates the offender and could land a mortal blow to democracy in Turkey.

Mr. Erdogan's impatience with the rule of law and his dictatorial tendencies make him appear less an aggrieved democrat, and more a protégé of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin -- a man whom Western officials now acknowledge to be a dictator. It may be too late in Moscow, but it's déjà vu all over again in Ankara.

Both diplomats and Turks embraced Mr. Erdogan's rise. In February 2001, Turkey's economy crashed. In a single day, the stock market dropped 18%, the Turkish lira lost one-third of its value, and per capita income plunged. Corruption scandals abounded and delegitimized established leaders. Mr. Erdogan's promises of a fresh start resonated not only with the Turkish public -- who saw a fresh face untainted at the time by corruption -- but also with a wide array of U.S. officials, who saw in him and his party a liberalizing force that could reconcile political Islam with Western democracy.

In the November 2002 elections, the AKP won 32%, a landslide by Turkish standards, and one amplified into unprecedented control because a quirk in Turkish electoral law gave Mr. Erdogan's party almost two-thirds of the parliament. Benefiting from his predecessor's IMF reform package and a huge influx of funds from Saudi Arabia and Gulf emirates, Mr. Erdogan presided over economic growth averaging nearly 7% per year.

Slowly, the gap between myth and reality widened. As the AKP grew secure amidst first parliamentary and then municipal electoral success, Mr. Erdogan turned on the democracy he had opportunistically embraced. He instituted an interview process to ensure the political loyalty of professional civil servants and, in an attempt to pack the judiciary with his own apparatchiks, he tried to force almost half Turkey's judges to retire early. When the courts found against the government for illegal seizure of opponents' property, Mr. Erdogan refused to honor the verdicts.

The crisis heightened last summer: Rather than continue a long tradition of seeking a consensus candidate for the presidency, an office meant to be above politics, Mr. Erdogan imposed his own party's choice (the unabashedly Islamist Abdullah Gul) over opposition objections.

Mr. Erdogan's disdain for press independence rivals the Kremlin's. He has sued more journalists than any predecessor, and has leaned on the owners of media outlets to rein in editors. Those who do not abide the prime minister's wishes face consequences. Police have referenced wiretaps of journalists during interrogations of editors.

In April 2007, Turkey's Saving Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF) -- staffed entirely by Erdogan appointees -- seized control of Sabah newspaper and ATV television, flagships of Turkey's second-largest media company. Earlier this year, they transferred ownership to an Erdogan ally after the prime minister stepped in to force the withdrawal of all competing bidders, and also removed state bank governors who'd objected to financing the sale because of the proposed loan's breach of their bylaws. The AKP used its absolute majority in parliament to shut down the ensuing investigation.

That too is a pattern. His cabinet faces almost 30 corruption probes, and the prime minister more than a dozen. Mr. Erdogan has transformed parliamentary immunity into carte blanche for profit.

Rather than show contrition in the face of the constitutional court's review, Mr. Erdogan has accelerated his attacks on civil liberties. Even the vice president of the constitutional court has claimed that he is a victim of illegal police surveillance.

An autocratic Turkey is not in U.S. or European interests. Mr. Erdogan pays lip service to Europe but disdains its institutions, arguing, for example, that only Muslim clerics are qualified to adjudicate Turkish human rights.

Rather than bridge the gap between Islam and the West, he has widened it by encouraging the most virulent anti-American and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. According to the Pew Global Attitudes survey, Turkey is now the world's most anti-American country.

Electoral success should never put politicians above the rule of law. That Mr. Erdogan won 47% in the last election heightens the tragedy, but should not buy immunity. In the U.S. and in Europe, the judiciary is the guardian of democracy. That it is as well in Turkey underlines the maturity of Turkey's democracy. Mr. Erdogan may aspire to be Mr. Putin, but he should neither have U.S. nor European support for his ambitions.

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