



TURKEY: BETWEEN EAST AND WEST?

Events: Although the republic of Turkey, founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), was firmly rooted in secularism, Islamist political parties have been gaining strength since the 1990s. The Welfare Party briefly led a coalition government in 1996, before being broken up by the army and, in the 2002 parliamentary elections, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) won two-thirds of the seats on the basis of 34 per cent of the vote (thanks to the 10 per cent electoral threshold, which excluded all but two parties from representation). The AKP has been in power ever since, with its devout Muslim leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, serving as prime minister between 2003 and 2014, and as president since 2014.

Significance: Turkey, a country of 83 million people, lies at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. Its geographical position is, nevertheless, also reflected in its political character, which has been shaped by a shifting combination of polyarchic, military and Islamic features. In line with ‘Kemalism’ (after Kemal Atatürk), modern Turkey is a constitutional republic committed to the rule of law, popular sovereignty, and a strict separation of politics and religion. In this context, the rise of political Islam during the 1990s and, especially, the rule of the AKP since 2003 have raised major questions about the country’s future political direction. Its critics warn that the AKP plans to overturn the secular nature of the Turkish state, possibly establishing an Iranian-style Islamic republic. The ban on the wearing of the Islamic headscarf in Turkish universities (only enforced since the 1980s) was lifted in 2010, and restrictions on the sale of alcohol have been imposed in some parts of Turkey. Turkey has also increasingly looked to build ties with the Arab world and has become more critical of Israel (particularly after Israeli soldiers raided a Turkish-led aid flotilla heading for Gaza in May 2010, causing the deaths of nine Turkish civilians). However, supporters of the AKP argue that it practises a constitutional form of Islamism very different from that found in Iran, in which moderate conservative politics based on Islamic values are balanced against an acceptance of Turkey’s secular democratic framework. Rather than choosing between East and West, the AKP



thus tries to establish a Turkish identity that is confident in being part of both. A key aspect of this compromise has been the quest, under the AKP, for membership of the EU, and, related to this, a willingness to introduce reforms in areas such as women’s rights, and Kurdish language and cultural rights.

These developments have, nevertheless, had major implications for military-civilian relations in Turkey. The army played a crucial role in the establishment of the Turkish republic, coming to be the custodian of ‘Kemalism’ and establishing strong links to the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the media. Four times in the period preceding the rise of the AKP (in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997) Turkey’s generals staged military *coups*, the last of which forced from office the country’s first Islamist prime minister. While some see the 1 million-strong army as the greatest obstacle to Turkey’s onward march towards democracy and EU membership, others view it as the vital guarantee of secular and open politics, an obstacle preventing the AKP’s moderate Islamism from becoming revolutionary Islamism. During the AKP period, the military’s freedom of manoeuvre has been curtailed by measures such as making the armed forces more accountable to civilian courts. However, the most significant shift in power from military to civilian authorities occurred as a result of the extensive purge of military personnel, and the restructuring of the armed forces, that took place in the aftermath of the attempted *coup* against the Erdoğan government in 2016.