

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during 1-15 July 2013

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Key Points:

- *Turkey's Parliament recesses for the summer break, having pushed through several pieces of legislation at the last hour. The most divisive of these aimed at stripping the power of the influential architects' union, which supported the Taksim Square protests.*
- *Progress is slow on the new constitution. The CHP accuses Prime Minister Erdogan of only wanting to blame the opposition on the glacial nature of the new document in order to make himself president.*
- *The PKK reshuffles its leadership, but the head of the group's armed wing warns the Turkish government to take immediate steps to show it is committed to the peace agreement.*
- *Turkey's backing of moderate rebel fighters in Syria has not turned the tide in the country as Salafist groups with Gulf backers gain influence in the opposition.*
- *The growing numbers of Syrian refugees pose a grave threat to Turkey's own domestic tranquillity.*
- *Completion nears on a northern oil pipeline between Turkey and the Kurdish Regional Government that will connect with the existing Kirkuk-Ceyhan line, all at the expense of Baghdad.*

Constitution and the Parliament

The Turkish Parliament entered its summer recess on July 13, and is set for a nearly four month break amidst one of the more contentious years in recent memory.

On the issue of the drafting of a new constitution, Erdogan pushed for an immediate submission of the 48 articles already agreed upon by the commission responsible for drafting a new document. The opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) vehemently opposed the move, with CHP deputies on the commission accusing the prime minister of trying to railroad through an incomplete version.

The CHP's Akif Hamzacebi told reporters "It is understood that Mr. Erdogan is looking for an excuse to walk away from the Commission. Mr. Prime Minister, if you want a democratic and libertarian constitution, if you are really sincere, let's regulate the election threshold and detention period before Parliament closes." ("Opposition divided on Turkish PM's new charter offer," Hurriyet Daily News, 11 July 2013).

The presidential role, currently filled by Abdullah Gul, is largely ceremonial. However, many think Erdogan is now proposing that the new constitution expand the office's authority that would allow for the dissolution of parliament and direct appoint of cabinet members.

The Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) was more conciliatory, saying that it would not oppose the move but that a democratization package should be passed. This BDP initiative would allow for changes to the country's legal code. Specifically, they targeted the draconian Anti-Terror Law, which has been used to arbitrarily jail Kurdish activists, politicians and supporters. The other minority party, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) said that it would have an internal discussion on Erdogan's proposal before announcing a decision.

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which holds a majority with 326 of 550 seats in the chamber, continues to hold sway over any legislation. In some cases, this has been productive, exemplified in the recent AKP-backed amendment to Article 35 of the army's Internal Service Code. This particular section was used to justify the three coups that overthrew democratically elected governments between 1960 and 1980.

The article was usually justified through the lens of the Cold War, when Communist infiltration was considered the most dangerous threat to the Turkish Republic. But in practice, the article had been used to mainly quash domestic opposition to the country's reactionary and secular establishment. The amended Article 35 now focuses more on threats from outside Turkey. While the AKP has done an effective job in corralling the once powerful generals, the party has been slow to push for a change in the military code. However, the recent Taksim Square protests evidently made many supporters of the ruling party nervous, and the amendment was drafted amidst the June unrest.

The early July military coup in Egypt only bolstered the AKP effort to change the article. Erdogan was a leading voice in denouncing the early July ouster of Egypt's President Mohamed Morsi, who remains under house arrest. The United States has refused to classify the putsch for what it was for fear of having to immediately revoke all military aid to Egypt. Erdogan, no stranger to military arrest and interference in the democratic process, condemned the action and continues to call for Morsi's release and reinstatement. Turning his stance into a domestic victory, the prime minister and his party's deputies in the Parliament used the issue to amend the article that has caused so much trouble for elected governments in the past.

In other matters, the AKP's overwhelming numbers were used to punish its domestic opponents. During a late night vote held right before the recess, the AKP pushed through a measure revoking the rights of the

Union of Architects and City Planners to sign off on new construction projects in the country's municipalities. The Union was a prominent critic of the Taksim Square construction project that spurred the June protests.

On the issue of the Constitution, the AKP is in an unfamiliar place, being unable to use sheer force of numbers to have its will carry the day. But on other matters, its superior numbers in the parliamentary chamber, coupled with a disunited opposition, mean it can push its own legislation whenever it wishes. This doesn't look to change until at least the next round of parliamentary elections, and even when those occur in 2015, a major shift in the electorate would be needed to curb the AKP's impressive poll numbers. Should the prime minister feel that the opposition parties on the Constitutional Convention are dragging their feet, he just may walk away from the table as CHP deputy Hamzacebi predicted.

PKK Peace Deal

Since the peace deal was announced, the Turkish Security Forces (TSK) have told reporters that over 2,000 recruits have joined the PKK. (Daloglu, "Visit to Southeast Turkey Offers Bleak View of Peace with Kurds", www.al-monitor.com, 15 July 2013).

While Ocalan is unquestionably the head of the country's Kurdish movement, a recent reshuffle in the PKK leadership has many observers curious as to the direction of the organization. The group's executive wing, the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), announced that Cemil Bayik and Bese Hozat would replace Murat Karayilan as head of the body. Karayilan, while remaining nominally in charge of PKK fighters withdrawing across the Iraqi border, is now head of the executive council of the KCK.

Speaking to Kurdish reporters following the shift, Karayilan warned that the AKP's lack of adherence to the tenets of the cease fire would prove its undoing if more of an effort wasn't put forth. Clashes between

the TSK and Kurds in the Lice district of Diyarbakir have shown how fragile the peace agreement is.

The Taksim Square protests have done much to take the government and public's focus off of the cease fire. Erdogan made an issue of supposed checkpoints set up by a PKK-affiliated group in Sirnak during a speech where he railed against the protest movement as a whole, but he has done little to move forward on the demands of the Kurdish-lead movement. The most proactive action has been to send his council of "Wise Men" around the country to promote the agreement. At the same time, Erdogan claims that the PKK is in fact dragging its feet by having only withdrawn 15 percent of its fighters from the country.

The fact of matter is that the peace agreement continues to hold, but it also stagnates. The AKP's unwillingness to acknowledge the BDP's demands regarding a change to the Turkish penal code (see above section: Constitution and the Parliament) has done nothing to help the situation. Should the peace agreement fall apart, a rearmed and rested PKK could pose a dangerous foe for the country. The onus is on the government to make the next move, and it needs to make impact. With the unrest in Syria, Taksim Square and now this affecting investment potential and the country's overall stability, the cease fire is one area where the AKP prime minister can use his influence to make concrete progress. It is certainly easier said than done, but settling with the country's largest minority after 30 years of conflict is certainly worth the risk.

Syria

Recent gains made by government forces under Bashar al-Assad appear to be pushing the conflict's conclusion far into the future. While the opposition forces were unable to secure a large scale breakthrough against a Syrian Army that is backed by Russian arms and Hezbollah fighters, large sections of opposition controlled territory are unlikely to fall back into government hands.

Turkey's backing of more moderate opposition fighters has also seen it lose some influence with the forces leading the fight against al-Assad. Salafist and Islamist fighters are the best equipped and organized units fighting the Syrian Army, and their success has overshadowed groups backed by Turkey. The Syrian National Council, which operates out of Istanbul, has little influence with those fighting on the ground.

More troubling for Turkey is the incessant flow of refugees across its southern border with Syria. In June alone, the TSK reported that 12,000 crossed the border illegally. ("Turkish army intercepts almost 12,000 illegal entrants from Syria border in June", *Anadolu Agency*, 14 July 2013). The country is estimated to be hosting over 400,000 refugees who have fled the country to escape the fighting. (www.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees).

The government estimates that it has spent more than \$1.5 billion to care for this population, an issue which Ankara is due to raise in talks with Brussels and Washington. Like most countries hosting a large refugee population realise, the promise of actual financial help from abroad tends to lag behind the promises of would be donors.

The presence of these refugees continues to cause strife in Turkey's southern provinces. With the Reyhanli bombings fresh in the minds of many Turks, tensions remain high. Turkish police, claiming they are attempting to track down workers and funding from the numerous NGOs that have popped up around the country since Syria's civil war began, have recently detained several foreigners in connection with the Taksim Square protests. European nationals working for EU-based NGOs have reported being interrogated by police regarding their support for the protests. ("Turkish police crackdown on Syrian aid workers", www.foxnews.com, 5 July 2013).

With the fighting likely to continue, Turkish leaders should use all the leverage they can with NATO allies and the EU for help in alleviating the humanitarian crisis. The potential for unrest amongst this population or with Turkey's own citizens remains a

threat to the country's domestic stability. Given this, it would not be surprising to see government officials begin to push the Syrian National Council and groups still under Ankara's sway to consider peace talks with Bashar al-Assad. Rumours of an American-Russian plan to host such an event are being leaked to the press, and while such a solution would be bitter in the mouths of Turkish leaders, it may be the best solution available.

Pipelines

Completion nears on an oil pipeline that will connect with the current Kirkuk-Ceyhan line. The \$200 million project will run 174 miles and provides dual incentives for the major partners, the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq based out of Erbil, and the growing energy consumer, Turkey. The former looks to control its own oil revenues before passing on Baghdad's share to the Oil Ministry, while the latter looks to lessen its dependence on Russian and Iranian energy supplies.

Although the project, and a predicted future one, has strained ties between Baghdad and Ankara, the fact remains that Baghdad can do little to stop its progress, short of a military intervention. Such a calculation appears too far in the minds of Iraqi leaders, so for now progress continues on its construction.

On July 15, after hours of running for the first time in nearly a month, Iraq's Oil Ministry unexpectedly shut off crude shipments via the Kirkuk-Ceyhan line. No explanation was given, and there were no reports of sabotage, as is occasionally the case with the line. While the stoppage is perhaps technical, the lack of oil flow still shows the power of Baghdad to regulate supplies via the system. This is likely in the minds of all players as the September completion date of the new line nears.

In light of last month's long awaited demise of the NABUCCO project following the Shah Deniz consortium's decision to go with the Trans-Anatolian

Pipeline (TAP), Azerbaijan's SOCAR and BP will each get 20 percent shares in the project. France's Total will take a 10 percent stake.

While Brussels has said that NABUCCO West is still possible, the likelihood of its completion would be at best accomplished by 2020. EU Energy Commissioner, Guenther Oettinger, attempted to put out the growing fires, writing in an op-ed where he stated that "This is just the beginning. The decision to build TAP and later to deliver more gas also means that the supply path to Austria – Nabucco West at the moment – is still in the conversation."

If anything, Oettinger has reaffirmed what NABUCCO (and Nabucco West) have been all along: points of conversation. Brussels' effort at trying to diversify its supply routes is nothing to be ashamed of, particularly

taking into account Russian dominance over Eurasian gas supplies. But the excessive costs, lengthy delays and loss of the EU's financial clout over the last decade have taken their toll on the project. Perhaps the plan can be resurrected after TAP's completion. But for now, the European Commission and other backers of the much maligned NABUCCO should follow all of Brussels' *Eurocrats* out the door in search of a nice summer holiday.

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