

Turkey's Secularism Challenged (2)

By YAMAUCHI Masayuki

< Anti-Islamic sentiment evident >

The recent drama also has made the nature of Turkey's secularism evident, with a distaste among individuals for Islamic worship. Perhaps, it is more appropriate to say Turkey's secularism stems from a unique nationalistic form of ideology with unveiled apathy toward Islam, rather than a simple principle of a separation between religion and state. Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2006, has an army colonel in his novel, "Snow," declare that "we [the military] represent the state." This means that "we as a state" publicly say without reserve that we do not trust devout followers of the Islamic faith.

In Turkey's modern history, the military has interfered in parliamentary democracy four times by staging coups aimed at protecting secularism when the country was thrown into serious political turmoil. Thus, in Turkey, military muscle has been used from time to time on the pretext of safeguarding the basis of democracy or secularism--a state of affairs inconceivable in Europe, where secularism originated.

However, it should be noted that, contrary to the Turkish military's wariness, the AK Party is not a political group linked to Islamic fundamentalism or terrorism. The party was founded in 2001 as a spin-off of a traditional Islamist party, but it distanced itself from refining Islamic teachings once it took the governmental helm in 2002. Furthermore, during the past five years the ruling party has carried out an experiment--unprecedented in the history of Islam--to function as a "secular Islamic party" by making moderate and balanced decisions under the secular system.

As a responsible political party, the AK Party has led Turkey into negotiations to join the European Union, and economic growth, registering an average annual expansion rate of 7 percent during the past five years. Indeed, Erdogan can be credited with attracting a total of 50 billion dollars in foreign direct investment in the past three years. The achievements of the AK Party are finally being accepted as a good lesson for moderate Muslims by Arab intellectuals, who were initially skeptical of the Turkish experiment.

< Secularist, not secular, republic? >

Turkish-style secularism prioritizes the sovereign right to control religion, while restricting

Islam-inclined education and customs, such as wearing hijab or headscarves, which can be considered religious symbolism. But can a nationalism-oriented ideology--which justifies the sacrifice of other values in its high-priority quest for the principles of secularism--be compatible with democracy? It cannot be the same as the democracy that prevails in Japan and the West, to say the very least. According to Mustafa Akyol, perspectives editor of The Turkish Daily News, in Turkey, the "secular republic" has changed to a "republic of secularists," which can hardly be regarded as "a republic of all citizens."

For many years now, secularists have implicitly maintained an establishment that controls political, military and judicial echelons. They do not want Turkey to revert to an Islamist state. They are more afraid of the possible erosion of the basis of their vested rights and authority due to the AK Party's democratic process--with due consideration for public opinion--for seeking to enter the EU and democratization movements in the country in support of the ruling party.

Most of Turkey's enthusiastic secularists do not support the government's bid for EU membership. Likewise, their antagonism toward the United States, the International Monetary Fund and globalization is not a casual phenomenon. During demonstrations to say "no Abdullah" to Gul's presidential bid, opponents of the AK Party carried signs on which his first name Abdullah--which means the Allah's servant--was peculiarly written as "ABD-ullah" with the capitalized letters of "ABD" synonymously meaning the United States in Turkish (Amerika Birlesik Devletleri). This can be read as "Allah's U.S.A."

The outcome of the upcoming general elections and presidential election will affect not only Turkey's path during the rest of the 21st century but also the future of Arab countries concerned about secularism. Pamuk, the Nobel laureate, points out that the Turkish people are haunted by the problem of being sandwiched between tradition and modernism, causing discord between "shame" and "pride," according to one of his lectures, titled "In Kars and Frankfurt."

Should the AK Party's "Islamic democrats" prevail in the elections, the party might possibly make the country highly transparent by disclosing information, among other positive measures, and promote representative or parliamentary democracy.

On the other hand, if the extreme secularists--who continue to act authoritatively by upholding Ataturk's teachings and traditions--win the elections, Turkey's closed civil society and elite-dominated politics will remain little changed. In the worst case scenario, a triumph of the "Islamic democrats" may induce pressure from or a coup by the Turkish Armed Forces.

The use of military force would scuttle the experiment by Turkey's moderate "secular Islamic" society to fix a party political system in place. The election results and the military's reaction to them could offer answers to Pamuk's civilization-related proposition, and Islam's potential. We should not forget that in the Middle East, too, the word "civil" is incompatible with the military in many cases. (End)

(This is the text of an article by Mr. YAMAUCHI Masayuki, Professor of Tokyo University, which was originally posted in "Daily Yomiuri" on June 10, 2007.)