



Global Highlights

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Geopolitics

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Turkey at the Cross-Roads

- Whilst many commentators are focussed on the 'will they, won't they' possibility of an Israeli attack against Iran, another country in the Middle East is also facing a defining moment for its political future. In the next few weeks the Turkish Constitutional Court will decide whether the governing Peace and Justice Party (AKP) is illegal and effectively ban the Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, from holding office. Although the exact date is unknown, the Court may publish its decision at the beginning of August and the judgment could have profound geopolitical ramifications for Turkey, the European Union and the balance of power in the Middle East.
- Modern Turkey has been a secular state since its foundation as a Republic by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1923. Whilst the population is predominantly Moslem, Ataturk laid the foundations for a strictly secular constitution which enshrined fundamental rights, including education and equality for women. Since 2002, however, Turkey has been governed by the AKP, a moderate Moslem party. This reflects both a resurgence of the country's Islamic roots and the rising tide of Islamism throughout the Middle East. Tensions have now arisen between current government policies and the secular values enshrined in the Constitution. This tension came to a head last year when the AKP nominated a devout Moslem, Abdullah Gul, as President. When the army, a staunch defender of the secular tradition, threatened to intervene, Prime Minister Erdogan called a snap election and was re-elected with an increased majority. The AKP has subsequently adopted further measures which are more in line with religious practice than with the secular tradition, and that has led to the current conflict between the Government and the Constitutional Court. The Court has banned Moslem parties several times before – but never a governing party and serving Prime Minister. Most commentators now expect the Court to do just that. As William Chislett of the think-tank Elcano has pointed out, a conflict between secular and religious powers would go to the heart of the Turkish state and could take some time to resolve.¹ The consequences of the judiciary dismissing an elected Government could be two fold - and subsequently determine whether the country looks East or West for its political alliances in the future.
- **First**, a profound constitutional crisis in Turkey will add to the growing disillusionment in many European countries about the possibility and/or desirability of Turkish accession into the EU. Turkish application for membership was invited in 2000 but recently negotiations have stalled in some areas. A constitutional crisis now would lead to a further loss of momentum which may be difficult to reverse. Whilst the Western powers have traditionally been anxious to keep Turkey within their sphere of influence - it is a member of organisations such as NATO and the Council of Europe – the immediate obstacles to joining the EU will be exacerbated at least in the short and medium term. This in turn could lead to a sense of alienation between Turkey and the EU with a consequent loss of European influence in the country. Far from protecting a secular tradition which sought inspiration in European ideals, a ban on the AKP may lead to a state of paralysis between Turkey and the EU
- **Secondly**, there are fears that removing the AKP and Premier Erdogan from office will further polarize Turkish society along religious lines. Paradoxically, far from lessening the influence of Islam it could lead to a radicalization of some Moslems in Turkish society. If the radicals win out in the long term they may be prepared to look east rather than west for alliances. Tension between Turkey and Syria may give way to a new understanding and Ankara could pursue its battle against the Kurdish PKK with renewed purpose - causing further problems for the fledgling administration and its American allies in Iraq. Turkey could shift from being a partner of the west to a base for radical Islam on Europe's doorstep.