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Three cheers for Turkey's emboldened civilian leadership



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What is the most significant development now under way in the Middle East? Hint: It's not the events in Iran, or the American troop withdrawal from Iraqi cities, or efforts to re-launch Arab-Israeli peace talks, important as these may be. Given the political realities that have defined the modern Middle East and maintained its destructive legacy of widespread and chronic autocracy, political violence and insecurity, the development that could change history for the better in our region is taking place quietly and slowly in Turkey.

Broadly, what we're seeing is the gradual control of the military by the elected civilian Turkish government. More specifically these days, it is the current discussion among leading political parties in Parliament to amend the Constitution so as to allow trials of military officers who carried out coups that toppled elected civilian governments in the recent past.

I am impressed by the historic consequences of the continuing, slow-motion civilian control of the Turkish military because it represents the only instance where the power of military, police, and intelligence-security agencies is being checked by democratically elected civilian authorities. This is important because the single most debilitating and retarding influence on the development of peaceful, prosperous and secure societies in our region has been the lack of accountable, effective governance systems. This is due mainly to the dominance of autocratic leaders linked to military and security authorities. The vicious circle must be broken if our societies are to aspire to any kind of normal life.

Civilians rather than military officers running governments is crucial if we are to overcome the various sources of national tension and distortion throughout the Middle East, including the Arab-Israeli conflict, foreign interference, natural resource imbalances, ethnic strife, and economic mismanagement and corruption. As long as security agencies and generals run our countries, we will never enjoy stable governance systems based on credible forms of representation, pluralism, and accountability.

The Turkish transition to a stable democracy in the past dozen years has been fascinating and important for many reasons. I believe the single most important reason has been the gradual assertion of power by

the civilians, and the armed forces' slow retreat to their barracks to play their important role of protecting the country, rather than running it.

Now, an even more significant step is about to be taken, as Parliament ponders amending the Constitution so that military generals who led a 1980 coup against the elected government can be put on trial. This is important because it would offer a degree of home-grown, civilian, judicial accountability for the armed forces that would be both legitimate and democratic. It would provide an example of how Middle Eastern countries might control the behavior of their military and security sectors, and end the impunity that armed forces, police forces and intelligence agencies now enjoy in doing virtually anything they want within their borders, without the constraints or accountability.

Holding military officers accountable for overthrowing a civilian government would be refreshing, and an important precedent. It would provide the only kind of deterrent that could possibly sustain long-term development of rational, stable, humane government systems in the region. Foreign invasions, coups and street agitation will occasionally change governments and rulers, but they generally do not generate the kind of indigenous constraints on abuse of power that are effective and legitimate. Putting generals on trial for overthrowing an elected government would do that, and would probably reduce, and ultimately eliminate, the chances of other power-hungry autocrats trying to seize power unconstitutionally. Generals are usually very smart, and they react rationally to legitimate power that is used to generate stability.

The constitutional amendment issue is one of several dramas that are unfolding in Turkey these days between the civilian government and the armed forces. Another pertains to accusations that some people in the military continue to plan coups or destabilizing acts against the elected government. How these two issues resolve themselves will be historically important for the Middle East. They might help end the legacy of out-of-control military, police and security systems that have long dominated the modern states of the region, resulting in the dysfunctional nature of these states that are little more than graveyards for human rights, constitutionalism and respect for the dignity and rights of citizens.

The Arab world has not always had a happy history with Turkey, but this Arab is cheering the Turks on and wishing them strength and success in achieving what the rest of us have failed to do: assert civilian control over our police, intelligence and military sectors, rather than allow them to run our societies and define the limits of what citizens can do and think.

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