
Ariel Cohen :Turkey Is US Vital Ally In Region Wrought With Danger

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Later this year, the Turkish Constitutional Court will hear a petition aiming to ban from politics the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and many of its most prominent members, including Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, its president, Abdullah Gul, and several dozen more AKP politicians. Since its establishment in 1962, the Court has heard no fewer than four other petitions to prohibit political parties. It has granted all of them.

"The trigger for the latest petition, filed by Abdurrahman Yalcinkaya, the Turkish state prosecutor, was the AKP's push to allow the wearing of the hijab (head cover) in Turkish universities. The hijab row has caused deep concern among the secular, mostly nationalist elite and state bureaucracy, who believe that the AKP is instigating a creeping "Islamization" of the Turkish Republic. Most Turks do not want to live under sharia law and do not want their country to become another Iran. The extremist wing of the AKP, along with 7 to 8 percent of the Turkish population, probably does," said Ariel Cohen, a senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation.

"However, banning the party would provoke a massive controversy. First, there is the issue of popular legitimacy. The AKP won 47 percent of the vote in the last parliamentary elections, giving it a broad popular mandate. It may be easy to ban a small, radical party, but it is very difficult to ban a ruling party with a second-term cabinet, a popular prime minister, and a newly elected president.

"Second, a judiciary crackdown will undoubtedly prompt AKP supporters to howl about the "persecution of Muslims," creating a powerful mobilizing factor for the next elections.

"Third, there is the issue of southeast Turkey. In this region, the AKP is splitting the vote with the Kurdish DTP party, which has ties to the PKK terrorist group. Banning the AKP would help the DTP to perform well in the 2008 municipal elections, scheduled for this coming fall.

"The Turkish state prosecutor would have a stronger case against the AKP if clear evidence of a conspiracy existed, such as documents outlining a coup plan, tape recordings of a plot to overthrow the secular republic, or blatantly subversive links to foreign regimes or terrorist organizations. Instead, the AKP has an amorphous agenda: parts of its platform smack of Islamization, but the Court lacks a clear evidentiary base to banish it from politics.

"The international repercussions of this case are enormous. The vast majority of elite Turks want their country to join the European Union. The AKP has done much to promote Turkey's accession, despite resistance from many European quarters. The EU and European governments have clearly indicated that if the Court bans the AKP, it will set back Turkish EU membership for years, if not indefinitely.

"At the same time, preserving the republic and repulsing threats both external and internal is the top priority for Turkey's state guardians: lawyers, judges, military officers, and security commanders.

They will ignore foreign protests if they feel their country is in peril.

"In deciding the AKP case, the Constitutional Court should use a laser scalpel, not a sledgehammer. It could place a sanction on the AKP and block its efforts at Islamization, yet not ban the party and not destroy the democratic foundations of the Turkish state. The Court could bar a handful of the most notorious AKP politicians, but not the popular Erdogan and Gul. It could deny the AKP state funds for implementation of its Islamization agenda. It could warn the cabinet not to ignore the country's secular spirit and legacy.

"Turkey is a vital ally of the United States in a region wrought with danger. Washington is well advised to stay out of Turkey's existential crisis and let the Court settle it the best way it can. Americans should respect Turkey's maturity and independence. But Washington should also emphasize its desire to maintain robust bilateral relations," Mr Cohen said, The American reports.
