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## Turkish Candidate Withdraws, as Voting Stalls



Burhan Ozbilici/Associated Press

Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, center, with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, right, and his deputy, Mehmet Ali Sahin, before the vote in Parliament Sunday.

By **SABRINA TAVERNISE**  
Published: May 7, 2007

ISTANBUL, May 6 — A Turkish presidential candidate with a background in Islamic politics withdrew his candidacy on Sunday, ending several weeks of struggle that has sharply divided Turkish society and reshaped the political landscape.

But the withdrawal of the candidate, Abdullah Gul, does not prevent his party from nominating him again after parliamentary elections in July.

Mr. Gul, Turkey's foreign minister, was unable to garner the support of secularist lawmakers, who boycotted a parliamentary vote on his candidacy on Sunday for the second time in nine days. The failure effectively ended his current bid for the position, which is the highest post in the nation's secular establishment and is extremely important to Turks intent on continuing the legacy of separating religion and government.

In Turkey, the president is elected by Parliament.

In comments to the state-supported Anatolian News Agency, Mr. Gul indicated that he was withdrawing because it was pointless to continue with more rounds of voting. It was an expected outcome: Turkey's highest court annulled a first round of voting last week on the grounds that there had not been enough lawmakers present to make it valid.

With secular political parties continuing their boycott on Sunday, it would be impossible to obtain enough votes to win.

"These futile rounds harmed the respectability of the Parliament, harmed the honor of politics," he said in remarks broadcast after the session. "They have depreciated politicians in the eyes of the people. Therefore, as of today, I believe that it is not correct

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for my nomination to continue any further.”

His party, known by its initials in Turkish, AK, could put his name forward after this summer’s parliamentary elections, which were moved up by three months to resolve the current political impasse.

The party, led by Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#), is also trying a political maneuver that would circumvent Turkey’s long-ruling secular establishment. It has proposed holding a popular election for president, moving the decision out of reach of the secular parties and the judiciary that want to stop Mr. Erdogan’s party from gaining the post.

Mr. Gul made reference to the proposed change in his remarks on Sunday. “From now on,” he said, “the people have the right to speak. I entrust us to the people.”

The proposal was passed by a parliamentary committee on Saturday but still had a number of political hurdles to clear. It is far from certain that it will become law.

Mr. Gul and his party are struggling against an immensely powerful establishment, which includes the military, the judiciary and the secular elite that form the fabric of many state institutions, like government ministries. That conflict will intensify over the summer, as the two camps battle for position in the parliamentary elections.

“The problem wasn’t solved,” Nilufer Narli, a sociologist at Bahcesehir University in Istanbul, said Sunday. “Both sides are more suspicious now. They decided to test how much power they have.”

The selection of Mr. Gul, formerly a prominent member of a pro-Islamic political party that was later closed down by the state, was pressed by harder-line members of the governing AK party. Other members, who sought compromise with the secular establishment, wanted Vecdi Gonul, the defense minister, but lost.

The political standoff is only part of the tumult in Turkey. Urban, secular Turks who are not part of the elite are deeply worried that Mr. Erdogan and the broad base of devout Turks from the country’s heartland that he represents will have little tolerance for secular lifestyles once they settle deeply into the institutions of the Turkish state.

In four years running the government, Mr. Erdogan has so far kept religion out of politics. But fears run deep among secular Turks.

Guldal Okutucu, a lawmaker with the main secular opposition party, said she had documented numerous cases of women’s rights being violated in areas where local officials from Mr. Erdogan’s party had been strong. She said she saw the episodes as part of a worrying pattern.

“When we call attention to girls being harassed because of their daring clothing, people are calling them individual incidents,” she said. “They are not. This is a sign of social transformation that both foreign observers and Turkish people should pay attention to.

“As soon as secularist principles are distorted,” she said, “there will be no gender equality.”

Such concerns about religion in government have been brushed off by Mr. Erdogan and allies, but have inspired demonstrations of tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of people in Istanbul and Ankara in recent weeks. Secular Turks also held demonstrations on Saturday.

Turkey’s powerful military remains an unknown factor in the current political troubles. The military sees itself as the defender of the secular legacy of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the modern state, and has ousted four elected governments since 1960 to prove it. It already issued a stern warning after the nomination of Mr. Gul, saying that it could intervene if necessary.

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But many argue that Turkey has come too far for the military to attempt a coup.

“There will not be a military coup in Turkey anymore — it’s passé,” said Seyfettin Seymen, a retired Air Force general.

*Sebnem Arsu contributed reporting.*

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