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World View Podcast

Interview By CALVIN SIMS

CALVIN SIMS. Welcome to The New York Times World View podcast, a weekly conversation with Times foreign correspondents from across the globe. I'm Calvin Sims of The Times. I spent 10 years as a foreign correspondent for the paper.

This week, I speak with Sabrina Tavernise, Times Istanbul correspondent, about the recent political crisis in Turkey, which is struggling to reconcile secularism, Islam and democracy.

Q. Sabrina, Turkey recently suffered its worst political crisis in many years when the military threatened to intervene against Turkey's moderately Islamic government. What happened? What brought this all about?

A. Well, it was initially a fight over the position of the presidency. And the presidency is not as powerful as the prime minister — Turkey has a parliamentary system, so its prime minister is the most powerful — but the presidency is seen as the highest post in Turkey's secular establishment. Turkey's a secular state, founded in 1923, and the state itself and the people who control the state and run things are secular elite that have been running the state for many years, since the state's founding. And they felt very threatened that this post was about to be taken by a young and up-and-coming government, political party, that had belonged to several political parties in the past with backgrounds in political Islam.

It's a little bit difficult to understand, but the political party now in power that's run by Prime Minister Erdogan, it's called the AK party, that stands for justice and development, and the party has been really doing phenomenally well economically, has been opening up the country in terms of democratic reforms, taking away military leaders that had been members of civil councils and ministries — really has been doing a lot to open up the system that had existed for about 80 years.

Q. Prime Minister Erdogan's party, how can you characterize it? Is it an Islamic party? Does it have Islamic leanings?

A. It's really not an Islamic party. But the people who formed the party came from backgrounds in Islamic politics. So the party really takes offense when people describe it as an Islamist party. It's really not. They are very, very devout Muslims, however. They do not want their religion to run the country; they don't want their religion in politics; they don't want to apply religious views in matters of state. And they really have pretty much stuck to that line throughout their four years in power. They came to power in 2002.

Q. And so Prime Minister Erdogan was going to nominate the foreign minister to the post of the presidency. And why is it the secularists didn't like this? What was wrong with this foreign minister from their standpoint?

A. Well, Abdullah Gul has been a very agile and skillful foreign minister. However, his wife wears the Islamic head-covering, headscarf, hijab, and that was something that's deeply symbolic in Turkey and was something that was quite distasteful to the secular establishment.

Now the argument that the AK party and Mr. Erdogan and his supporters make is that, in fact, the objection to Mr. Gul is much more about the secular establishment wanting to stay in power and much less about objections to religion.

The concern by secular Turks who are not members of the elite, however, also has its merits, which goes essentially like this — Mr. Erdogan and his supporters may not be bringing Islam into politics now, say that they won't, say that they don't want to, but they have a large grass-roots constituency of supporters who really would like to see more freedom to practice their religion.

And secular Turks say, We don't really know what their vision for a future for Turkey is — Do they want to see it more religious? Do they want to see it more devout? Will I be able to walk around not wearing a headscarf? Once they have freedom to practice their religion more, how free will I be to practice my secular lifestyle? And that's essentially the conflict.

Q. And so this comes to nearly a head when the vote is about to take place to approve Gul. And in the midst of this the military issues basically a warning. Now that would seem very strange to most Americans, that the military would issue a warning that if this foreign minister is actually elected president that they might actually take some action. How does that come about?

A. Well the military is extremely powerful in the Turkish state. It's the last check in the system of checks and balances for secularism. It considers itself the protector, the defender of Atatürk's secular legacy. It's deposed, by military and non-military means, four elected governments since 1960. It really plays a large part in the foundation of the Turkish state also. Atatürk was a military man. It's not quite as nefarious as everybody would like to make it out to be, but a lot of Turks are arguing that its messing in politics has outlived its usefulness, and it's unlikely and unhelpful if it interfered now. People don't really expect it to, but of course it's not out of the question.

Q. And we should point out that the military there in Turkey has intervened and launched several coups on the past. Right?

A. Yes, four elected governments since 1960 it has ousted.

Q. So how was this resolved? Obviously Mr. Erdogan nominated Mr. Gul. And was there a vote? Did the military actually start to launch a coup? How did this resolve itself?

A. No, the military simply gave a warning on April 27, although it was a very stern one and highly unusual, and that is what made everybody worry that there might be a coup. Soon after there was — essentially an opposition political party filed a case against Mr. Erdogan and Mr. Gul in the constitutional court, arguing over procedural details basically — saying that there were not enough people present at the voting for Mr. Gul in order to make a quorum in order to have the session be valid.

The constitutional court, which is also really part of the secular establishment itself, of course, ruled in favor of the opposition party. And that's essentially what blocked Mr. Gul and Mr. Erdogan from getting their way with the presidency.

Now they're suggesting that the president be elected by popular vote — so essentially taking that extremely sensitive and important position out of the hands of the secular establishment and putting it into a popular ballot in front of Turks across the nation. That is something that could really shake up the power structure as well.

Q. Now there were massive protests by Turks, and in many of these protests they were speaking out not only against military intervention but also what they saw as a move toward a more Islamic state. What do most Turks make of this? Do they think this is a normal part of democracy there? Are they upset with the secular establishment for blocking what would be a democratic vote under their current system for Mr. Gul? What's their take?

A. It really depends on who you talk to because, you know, the nation really is split. There are a large group of people who are more religious, had never really had any real access to power, were thought of almost kind of as second-class citizens I would argue, although people would dispute that, and are now coming into their own. There's been an economic boom. People have become middle class, lower-middle class and they're pushing up into power. Those people are saying, What's wrong with us wearing a headscarf in the university? What's wrong with that? These ideas you have of modernism are very outdated.

And then you have the group of people in society who are saying, I don't really know where Mr. Erdogan is taking all of this. What is his vision for gender equality? What is his vision for protecting my secular lifestyle once we start giving more religious freedoms? I don't trust that the rank and file of his party will respect my secular ways.

Q. You make a very good point, Sabrina, which is that behind this, this is a struggle — a struggle between this urban secular elite and this new emerging middle class of religious Turks who are perhaps, as maybe you've written, chipping away at the economic and political power that had been there with the elite. Right?

A. Right.

Q. Why are secular Turks so fearful of Erdogan and his government? What do they think will happen? They've not promoted or proposed any laws that would challenge the secular tenets of the Turkish Constitution, have they?

A. Well, they first of all come from a deeply conservative and religious background, and the party that they belonged to that was

shut down by the state in 1997 was very, very much a religious Islamic political party. They remember that that was their very recent past.

You know, these are deeply emotional issues — I mean do you go to a public swimming pool where it's separated by men and women? I mean that's something that some Turks would say that's old-fashioned and absurd and I don't want to have to have my family and my home and my neighborhood be subject to that. And then others would say, This is the only way we can go to a public swimming pool. We can't be in a bathing suit in front of other people's husbands. You know, they are emotional things.

I think that there is some exaggeration of the Islamist threat. But there's also some real concerns that just aren't being addressed by the politicians. They're not talking about it. No one's saying what their vision for the future and for secular lifestyles is. In fact, they dismiss the demonstrations and the secular people who have concerns as kind of irrational, irrelevant and not worth their time talking about.

Q. At the same time, Prime Minister Erdogan's government, as you pointed out, has proven itself to be quite efficient in delivering basic needs and services there and the economy is booming. So I would imagine — Is this government very popular because of the way it's running Turkey?

A. They definitely had many voters, there were some political analysts who told me, in the last election who voted for them because of the corruption by previous governments and these guys seemed less corrupt. And they were — Mr. Erdogan was very active as Istanbul's city mayor. So, yes, they did definitely win votes because of their performance. But it's also part of it is a religious identity vote, not all of it.

Q. How should we in the United States view what is happening there in Turkey? Turkey has been somewhat of a model of how democracy in a predominantly Muslim country can be compatible. How should we view what is taking place there — this sort of clash between democracy, secularism and Islam?

A. I think it still is a model. I mean I think that it still has a lot to teach the world and it hasn't gone backwards in any way. I think it's just trying to, itself, work out in its own mind where this is going. And I think in a lot of ways it's healthy, that it's a very public process that's happening on the streets and in newspapers and on television talk shows. They are being extremely thoughtful about it.

Q. What are political analysts there predicting will happen, especially this summer when new elections are going to be held again?

A. A lot of them say that Mr. Erdogan and his AK party will probably do better in the popular vote than it did in 2002. It'll probably get more votes. However, they expect that it will have fewer seats in Parliament because the opposition parties will probably band together and will manage to present a pretty good challenge in terms of parliamentary seats. So that's what people are saying right now.

Q. Well, Sabrina Tavernise, Times Istanbul correspondent, thank you so much for speaking with us.

A. Thanks, Calvin.

SIMS. And thanks for listening. I'm Calvin Sims of The New York Times. I'll be back next week with another edition of World View.

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