

# Tennessee Voices: Turkey's balancing of Islam, secular reform offers model of democracy for Middle East

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**Turkish President Abdullah Gul, right, and Chief of Staff Gen. Yasar Buyukanit, left, take part in a Victory Day event in Ankara. The event marked an 85-year-old victory over Greeks that was considered crucial in the Turkish Independence War. BURHAN OZBILICI / ASSOCIATED PRESS**

Lost in the news in recent weeks about the war in Iraq and the U.S. presence there has been an historic political transformation in Turkey. There a coalition of Christians and Muslims, civil society activists, and business leaders supported the candidacy of Abdullah Gul for the presidency of Turkey's secular republic. Importantly, Mr. Gul, a British-trained economist who speaks fluent English, is a member of Turkey's Islamic Justice and Development Party (known by its Turkish acronym "AK"). Nonetheless, he became Turkey's first Islamist president when he won 339 of the 448 votes cast in the nation's legislature on Tuesday.

For decades Turkey has balanced its centuries-old Islamic heritage with its desire to be a modern, secular Western society. Secular and urban Turks — supported by the nation's powerful military — champion the secular, Westernizing reforms that Turkey's first president, Mustafa Kemal, implemented after World War I. Other Turks argue that Turkey should not turn its back on its religion, culture or Muslim neighbors while seeking to modernize. These Turks have moved by the thousands into Turkish cities since the 1970s and now constitute a prosperous middle class.

On several occasions since the 1950s, the Turkish army has overthrown governments that it felt had not sufficiently respected Mustafa Kemal's legacy. Secular Turks invested great authority in the office of the presidency, which is elected every seven years by Turkey's national assembly.

The tensions between the Islamic and secular visions of Turkey intensified after the AK party won the 2002 elections for Turkey's national assembly with 34 percent of the vote, a virtual landslide in Turkey's political system. The party championed Turkey's Islamic identity but also sought strong ties with Washington, and pursued economic reform and liberalization, and Turkish membership in the European Union. Thanks to these policies, Turkey's economy boomed.

When the AK party nominated Abdullah Gul in spring 2007 to succeed the outgoing president and held an election in the Turkish legislature, the country's judiciary invalidated the election. For its part, the army issued a statement on its Web site that many read as a threat to stage a coup if Gul were elected president.

The AK party responded by holding elections, where it won a larger victory than it did in 2002: 46 percent of the vote. Confident of public support, the AK party immediately renominated Gul to become president. While the Turkish army has voiced its displeasure with Gul's win, few expect it to launch a coup.

If Gul and the AK party continue to successfully balance Islamic values with modernization and pro-Western policies, Turkey could emerge as the Islamic democratic model that many had hoped Iraq would become after the U.S. invasion in 2003. While some have warned that the AK party will now

show its true "colors" and transform Turkey into an Islamic state along the lines of Saudi Arabia, the party's record since 2002 suggests that this outcome is not likely. That should offer some hope as our nation faces many challenges in Iraq, the Middle East and the broader Islamic world.

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