

20/11/2002

It could be Turkish delight

Abdullah Ahmad

WHAT a contrast: former French president Valery Giscard d'Estaing, the man charged with charting the European Union's constitutional future, stated unequivocally that Turkey's membership would spell the demise of the union.

The leader of the Turkish ruling party, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in studiously temperate words stressed his party's - the Justice and Development Party (known by its Turkish initials, AKP) - commitment to reforms for Turkey to be embraced by the EU this decade.

The Frenchman's behaviour is undiplomatic, insensitive and outrageous. I am glad his Jean-Marie Le Pen-like remarks have been forcefully repudiated, not by France but by Turkey's traditional rival Greece. Costas Simitis, the Greek Prime Minister, wisely declared that the EU would be making a gross blunder if it snubbed Turkey's advances.

Perhaps, to d'Estaing, the EU should be only for Christian nations, a latter-day Holy Roman Empire. In the present world, I would have thought this a golden opportunity for the EU to mediate between Islam and the West and Christianity in general. The EU should engage the Muslims, not reject them. Turkish membership of the EU will give Islam a chance to adapt and even clear its path to modernity.

Political Islam, which now rears its head everywhere, can be tempered. The Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, has been strenuously fighting against overly literal interpretations of Islam by partisan preachers and politically biased religious administrators for their own ends.

The new Turkish Government - even if it is Islamic - has been at pains to stress that its Islamic roots are not incompatible with Turkey's secular constitution, which it has sworn to respect and uphold. Erdogan, who wields the power behind the throne since he can't assume the office of prime minister because of a conviction for inciting religious hatred, has deftly chosen to highlight the enlightened and workable elements of his Government's programmes.

Let's admit it and be fair. I do not believe the AKP was swept into office because the secular Turks were infatuated with Islamic radicalism. It was a huge protest against the non-performing economy, deteriorating standards of living and endemic corruption perpetuated by a jaded and thoroughly discredited ruling elite who have been running (and ruining) Turkey for decades.

As a practising fundamentalist Muslim and a democrat, it was hard for me not to rejoice at the triumph of the AKP in the general election on Nov 4. Depending on where you stand, it was hailed or hissed as the "Turkish experiment", even a "Turkish delight" or "No Turkish delight", a litmus test of the congruity of Islamism with democracy.

No previous excursion at combining the two, such as in Iran and Sudan, has been outstanding enough to excite the proponents of both camps. But the AKP's political co-religionists here and elsewhere should pause before anticipating that victory will soon be theirs.

The differences between Turkey and the rest of the Islamic world outweigh the similarities. There are common strands as well as uncommon circumstances in the election result. Turkey is no doubt a Muslim nation but it's a secular state with an avowedly different culture and way of life from the Arabs, Iranians and us.

What impressed me was not the rise of a "party with Islamic roots" by popular vote but how good its leader, Erdogan, looked in a business suit. Now he only needs to concentrate on translating his words into deeds and all will be well, or should be.

He did not wear his Islamic credentials on his sleeve, lest he tempt the determinedly secular military to close him out as it did with the AKP's predecessor, the Welfare Party, which was shoved out of government in 1997. He did not appear to be the same man who had been thrown in jail for his inflexible beliefs and thus banned from contesting the election.

Wearing the right clothes has also been attempted by Pas, some of whose leaders put Western dress on display at its annual muktamar, in Parliament and ceramah in the big cities for the benefit of the media and the non-Malay voters. But my sincere advice to them is to try harder to overcome their discomfort or get better tailors.

Sartorially, if not substantively, the AKP resembles Umno more than Pas. Turkey wants to find its own place in the world, neither a facsimile of its neighbours in the Middle East nor a pale shadow of its past as the rump of Islam's greatest empire, the Ottoman.

The genuinely dapper Abdullah Gul, the economics professor who is the prime minister designate, is even less like a mullah in disguise than Erdogan. "We want to prove that a Muslim identity can be democratic, transparent and compatible with the modern world," he said, adding in two separate interviews that he would prove to, and shock, the sceptical West that Islam can be democratic, transparent and co-exist with others.

"We will prove this. Turkey will be an example for the world." He even affirmed Turkey's friendship with the Great Satan, the United States, and its membership of Nato. Washington, desiring good relations with Turkey for its own strategic reasons, has so far reciprocated. Both Gul and Erdogan want to accelerate their country's admission to the EU, a hitherto Christian club that has kept Ankara knocking on the door for years.

Neither is enamoured of sex-segregated queues at supermarkets or itching to institute the purdah. An end to the rather silly ban on headscarves in government offices and schools may come, but it will not be a priority, Erdogan went so far as to say. Also unlike the patriarchal Pas, the AKP has 13 women in Parliament, with heads uncovered!

Like most moderate Muslims, modern Turkey has a personality split between Westernisation and Islamisation. The populist AKP aims to narrow that split, not widen it. To remove any remaining straw that Pas and its sympathisers might grasp in order to celebrate theocratic Islam's onward march to inevitable glory through the ballot box, they should consider some facts in the election outcome.

Although the AKP won 363 seats in the 550-member National Assembly - the first comfortable majority in 15 years by any party - it won only 32 per cent of the vote in a country that is 99.8 per cent Muslim. The secularist Republican People's Party came in second with 19 per cent.

The rest of the electorate was divided between a handful of independents or found themselves under the 10 per cent minimum required to send their candidates to parliament. The AKP "landslide" has been described as "overwhelming", but seven out of ten voters had nothing to do with it.

In fact, the Turks were not as eager to ring in an Islamist government as they were, as I stated earlier on, to turf out the old guard, which they did comprehensively. None of the parties in former prime minister Bulent Ecevit's three-way coalition made the 10 per cent cut. The ageing and ailing Ecevit, whose Democratic Left party scored only just over one per cent, is at last quitting politics. Two of his predecessors, Mesut Yilmaz and Tansu Ciller, were also swept out.

The disillusion with the political establishment was total. To get rid

of it, the voters were prepared to try out a party that was only a year old on the basis of nothing more than its "clean" image. It was a leap of faith, in more ways than one.

Nevertheless, the Turkish election does hold a critical lesson for both Umno and Pas. Political Islam, whether conservative or liberal, or preached by men in turbans or suits, is on the rise. Like the AKP in politically fragmented Turkey, if Pas wants to get anywhere in multi-racial Malaysia, it must play the electoral numbers game; it has to develop a fashion sense, figuratively speaking, and start making sense. It is not likely ever to get an outright majority in an open contest unless, of course, Malaysians opt to take leave of their senses.

The election showed what many in Umno have known all along: that the success of Islamist alternatives depends acutely on the failure of incumbents. Theocratic Islam is not a natural, popular choice but one made under duress.

In Malaysia, it takes less than the power of guns (Turkey's generals have vowed to keep up the fight against Islamic fundamentalists for a thousand years if need be) to hold down the extremists. Even so, Umno can no longer presume to hold the Malay Muslim middle ground by default. It must govern well and do so by the most basic Islamic virtue of all, that of cleanliness - amanah dan bersih - get rid of the minority who are living outrageously beyond their means and most blatantly showing it off.

Islam is a democratic and egalitarian religion. It has no clergy, no pope, in fact no one has the sole, privileged status to interpret the faith. The negative side is that we can't exclude extremist interpretations and, usually, misrepresentations.

The real danger now is that the extremist Islamists have gone on to exploit and feed the people on the glories of ancient Islam. Nothing wrong really, if it was done to encourage people to revel in the past to help build the ummah rather than demonise "others", to persecute, make a virtue of intolerance, divisiveness and, in some cases, unwinnable wars.

The West and Islam must soon come to some understanding to engage each other, and co-exist. Otherwise, I cannot see an expanding horizon of harmony on either side of the escalating divide.