

Turkey's travails

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Last week's murder of a prominent Turkish judge, ostensibly by an Islamist aggrieved at his court's ruling on the headscarf controversy, throws a worrying spotlight on the growing rift between the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, with its roots in political Islam, and the secular establishment, militant defenders of the legacy of Kemal Atatürk. This division is being magnified by the stand-offishness - real or perceived - of the European Union towards Turkey's accession ambitions. That is a potentially poisonous combination.

Turkey's powerful military and Kemalist bureaucracy has always been profoundly suspicious of **Mr Erdogan** and his Justice and Development party (**AKP**), built from the rubble of more overtly Islamist parties and broadened into a Muslim democrat movement analogous to Christian Democracy. While both sides engage with each other in a wary pas de deux, each occasionally puts its foot in it.

The government's attempt to criminalise adultery, and the state's attempt to prosecute Orhan Pamuk, the world-renowned novelist, for denouncing the mass murder of Armenians in the late Ottoman empire, are memorable examples of such blunders. But they were recognised as such and withdrawn.

The Erdogan administration tried recently to impose an Islamic banker - who eschews interest as usury - as head of the central bank, which sets interest rates. But it reconsidered.

EU bad faith

Meanwhile, Turkish perceptions of EU bad faith are encouraging popular disillusion with Europe and proving a godsend to the nationalist right and hardline Islamists. Ankara formally started membership talks last autumn, a process always expected to last a good decade. Its requirements, in minority, human and democratic rights as well as adopting the *acquis* of EU rules, were always going to guarantee a bumpy ride. But in the backwash of last year's French and Dutch rejection of the EU constitution, hostility to Turkish membership has hardened. To Turks, alert to every slight, the EU often seems to be conducting a moral inventory rather than a negotiation.

Europe is not only the engine of reform but the glue of political cohesion in Turkey. EU membership is a national project shared by the people, business and the army, and embraced by the AKP as a shield against the generals. The European perspective, in other words, is a good part of the explanation of why this Muslim democracy and secular republic works, despite its unresolved contradictions.

Nobody but the Turks can deal with issues such as the place of the army and role of Islam in national life. But these towering controversies would be more manageable if the EU could avoid giving the impression it will keep raising the barriers to Turkish entry. However long it takes, Europe needs to embrace Turkey, not push it into the geopolitical twilight.