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Two countries obsessed with 'R and R'

Tuesday, March 4, 2008

Italy and Turkey, two countries on the surface quite different, are going through the same predicament. They are both obsessed with religion and regionalism

Dennis REDMONT

ROME----Italy and Turkey, two countries on the surface quite different, are going through the same predicament. They are both obsessed with "R and R" – religion and regionalism. In Italy, a national snap election campaign (vote on April 13/14) may simplify a myriad of parties (39) in parliament, but religion (mostly around abortion issues) keeps getting in the way. In Turkey, it is also a post-election and a pre-election (local election 2009) period where the scarf as an Islamic attire, keeps unfurling and clouding other issues.

Unity versus regionalism:

Regionalism is also another obsession. Italy is about to start celebrations for its 150th year of unity (1861) establishing a committee this month in Turin to organize festivities for 2011. But a survey on this occasion, by SWG polling on this occasion just showed that only 52 percent (and in the North 45 percent) of Italians consider unity unrenounceable. This means that local and regional loyalties, from your football team to your Sicily or your South Tyrol, are more important than nationhood! Regionalism is also an issue in Turkey where the "K-word" is a

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troubled letter, to the point that some suggest an "Italian" formula for the Kurdish majority areas. Essentially this means throwing money at the problem for a few decades, then allowing the region to manage its own tax revenues, education system and civil service in exchange for loyalty to the central state. I do not mean to equate the "K-region" with Trentino Alto Adige/South Tyrol, the German-speaking area of Italy, but Italy did have bombing deaths, underground terrorism and other nasty things to deal with until it granted wide regional autonomy in 1971 after a smoldering dispute from 1947 throughout the 1960s. The case was taken up to the United Nations and even to the International

Court of Justice in The Hague. All of this was definitively solved when Austria across the border joined the European Union in 1995. Few people remember this. While Turkish politics are preoccupied with the issue of lifting a ban on female students wearing Islamic scarves at the university, Italian politics are heating up with a debate over abortion. It all started after police raided a public clinic in Naples and detained a 39-year-old woman for aborting a foetus older than the allowed period for abortion. That foetus had a syndrome that usually leads to sterility and had to be aborted.

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The steel ladies:

Silvio Berlusconi's former minister Giuliano Ferrara, who is now editor of a daily newspaper mostly funded by the media tycoon's wife, began campaigning for a worldwide moratorium on abortion and announced he was running for election on an anti-abortion slate. All this has reawakened the pro versus pro-choice debate and drew the Vatican even more into politics. Walter Veltroni, the center opponent of Berlusconi, has tried to steer clear of the dispute. But this is Italy. Religion is important. The pope lives nearby. Of course, there are other common obsessions for the two countries: Unemployment, job security, infrastructure financing, energy and even joining or abandoning the EU. Both countries feel squeezed and jilted by the Euro and also by the EU Commission, which scolds it constantly for its high deficit and not respecting EU norms. And think about the problems of coping with your traditional ally, the United States. Don't forget that Italy had troops in Iraq and has plenty of other problems in Afghanistan and Lebanon along with Turkey. And also think about coping with rejuvenation of industry. Both countries, traditionally male-dominated, now have a woman at the head of their industrial confederation. In Turkey, Arzuhan Yalçındağ is head of TÜSİAD. In Italy, Emma Marcegaglia, 42, once dreamt of being a ballet dancer but is known as the "steel lady" will succeed the boss of Fia Ferrari, Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, in May at the Italian equivalent of TÜSİAD, Confindustria. Marcegaglia, who was given the nick name "Black and Decker" for her tenacity and her determined heads a steel manufacturing business with 6,500 employees making radiators, grills and steel tools and has served as head of the young industrialists in the past. Looking forward to the next few weeks it will be interesting to see what impact the Expo 2015 race will have on both countries, their economies, their politics. On March 31, there will be a multi-billion Euro winner for the universal Expo. Either Milan gets the prize or İzmir jumps for joy. That race could impact on Berlusconi's election fortunes. He is a passionate Milanese. Similarly, in Turkey, this could have an impact on the opposition party's rule in İzmir. For the moment, both countries are coping with internal "R and R." Neither country has a clear advantage which is advantageous for their international image. The world's governments will decide which country has the most serious Expo 2015 bid. I bet there is more than one country which is reconsidering

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vote but we cannot say how, because voting is by secret ballot. Does how Italy solve its garbage or its national airline carrier Alitalia's crisis and its economy have a greater impact on the voting countries, than the scarf discussion or the Turkish army in northern Iraq?

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