

Turkish politics: more democracy and Europe or more Islam?

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Introduction¹

Turkey is facing a test for democracy and its EU membership bid at a critical juncture of its development. Two major issues are at stake. First, democracy is threatened by growing extremism, either of a religious or a secular character. As polarisation grows, people are forced to take sides. Many are squeezed between the extremes: ultra-nationalism, hardliner laicism, and neo-fundamentalism. Second, Turkey risks losing its EU perspective. There have been doubts about the Justice and Development Party (AKP) drive for the EU membership. The stagnation of EU-driven reforms and the perceived Islamisation of society have left many wondering, both in Turkey and in Europe, how much enthusiasm is left for EU membership?

Turkey is currently characterised by increased polarisation along the following cleavages: Islamist versus secularist; Kurdish separatism versus Turkish ultra-nationalism; and liberals versus static nationalism. Most liberals, who could help moderate tensions, consist of the urban middle and upper classes. They are frustrated with the “old static mentality” represented by the major opposition party, the People’s Republican Party (CHP). The EU membership issue fosters nationalist-liberal tensions at a time when the AKP presents itself as the only supporter of EU integration despite the fact that reforms have slowed down since 2005.

Against the backdrop of existential debates, Turkey entered a new political era when the AKP secured an overwhelming victory in the July 2007 elections followed by the August election of Abdullah Gül as President. Five novelties in Turkish politics will be discussed in this article. First, the drafting of a “civilian” constitution, which is necessary to open the way to further reforms and talks with the EU, and which would be a novelty since it would be civilians drafting the constitution instead of the military. Second, the change in the governing AKP’s policy, which has moved in two new directions: from religious indifference to pro-religion rhetoric; and from a consensus approach to a more populist “will of the people” policy. The third novelty is the reduced “informal” influence of the military on political issues and processes. Fourth is the parliamentary representation of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP), and the fifth novelty is the economic and political exchanges with the Middle East and Muslim populated Asian countries as well as the increased attention given to Turkey by the Arab media since the early 2000s. Although not discussed in this article, it is important to note that Turkish foreign policy is also changing its orientation.

¹ The title is inspired by Annette Grossbongardt’s article “Less Europe, More Islam”, published in *Spiegel*/November 2006, where she wrote: “For almost half a century, Turkey has been pursuing European Union membership. With negotiations now started though, enthusiasm is waning. And the influence of Islam is on the rise”, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,446163,00.html>.

A new constitution

Drafting a “civil constitution”, under a commission led by Prof. Ergun Özbudun, raised hopes and fears in September 2007. Many feared that the AKP could propose a constitution targeting changes to the secular nature of the Turkish Republic. New fears have surfaced with the AKP’s new policy, which emphasised representing the majority of the people and gave priority to religious issues.

The current 1982 Constitution was prepared after the 1980 military coup. Until the recent constitutional amendments, made in order to fulfil the Copenhagen political criteria, it included non-democratic articles. The AKP portrayed drafting a new constitution as an attempt to “broaden freedom” and to protect individual rights rather than the static ideology prevailing since the foundation of the Turkish Republic. Turkey needs constitutional amendments in order to implement the EU acquis. Some raised the question whether Turkey should change the entire constitution or just make amendments. The idea of drafting a new constitution disappointed people who expected more democracy, but observed that the AKP government gave a sudden priority to constitutional amendments to “free headscarfs at universities”, while many other issues of democratisation were pending, as discussed below. The entire draft constitution has not been voted on in the parliament.

The AKP policy shift

The AKP won the 2002 general elections against all the mainstream parties. Only the main secular party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) was represented in parliament along with the AKP after 2002. Following a new AKP victory in July 2007 the composition of the parliament is as follows: the AKP (340 seats); the CHP (98 seats), the ultra-right Nationalist Action Party (70 seats); DTP (20 seats); the Democratic Left Party (13 seats). A number of minor parties obtained one seat, as did several independent MPs.

Soon after the electoral victory in July 2002, the change in AKP policy manifested itself in two forms: from the indifference to religion to a religion-friendly policy; and from consensual politics to a more populist stance. The AKP increasingly gave religious issues, such as the headscarf issue and the equivalence of Imam-hatip schools, priority. With regard to breaking with the consensus policy, the AKP began to emphasise its majority position and increasingly claimed to “represent the popular will” of Turkey, in order to demonstrate its unquestionable power.

The concern among secularist elites peaked when the AKP decided to amend the Constitution in a way that would enshrine freedom of dress at universities. In order to facilitate this, the parliament amended two articles. They were passed in January 2008 with the support of the AKP and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which has 70 seats. The first amendment was to Article 10, on equality before the law, which deals with equal rights and non-discrimination. The second amendment was to Article 42, on the Right and Duty of Training and Education. The amendments added “for reasons not explicitly mentioned by law” and provided that any limitation must be spelt out in law. Thus, the amended Article 42 reads: “No one shall be deprived of the right of learning and education for reasons not openly mentioned by laws. The limits of the use of this right will be determined by law”.

These two amendments created an ambiguous status for “headscarf freedom” because the AKP government did not make the related change in the Higher Education Law. Consequently, there was no law clearly defining the dress code for university students. Despite this, the head of the Higher Education Council ordered universities to admit the entry of headscarf-wearing students. Many rectors called this criminal and refused to obey the order. Consequently, universities had conflicting views and practices concerning headscarf freedom in February and March 2008. The issue divided the academic world and led to several signature campaigns both in support of the headscarf ban and in opposition to it. The so called “Third Way” campaign that was initiated by Professor Fuat Keyman diffused some of the tensions and aimed at ending the antagonisms around freeing or banning the headscarf. The “Third Way” pushed for “discussing nuances in solving the long-lasting headscarf problem”. He added: “now we tend to acknowledge people’s fears, worries and grievances”.²

The headscarf debate has created polarisation among university students who had once been depoliticised and indifferent to the issue. Now, some students perceive the headscarf reforms as a freedom of choice, while others perceive it as an undemocratic attempt to free a political symbol in order to create pressure on women to cover themselves.

Another crisis, this time of democracy, gripped Turkey in March when the Chief Prosecutor, Abdurrahman Yalcinkaya, submitted a 163-page case for the banning of the AKP on account of it “being the focal point of anti-secular activities”. On 31 March, the Constitutional Court agreed to review the case. The indictment demands barring 71 of its members, among them Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan and President Abdullah Gül, from politics for five years.

The AKP’s first response was to communicate its anger and bitterness. At the same time, the AKP portrayed itself as a principled defender of freedom and democracy vis-à-vis the “dogmatic elite”, referring to the military, the judiciary and the bureaucrats. In responding to the closure case, the Prime Minister made several speeches to the AKP’s women and youth organisations in March and April, which were all televised. Four points were highlighted in these speeches:

- How the AKP strengthened the economy.
- How the AKP defended women’s rights and also political freedoms in general.
- Casting the Chief Prosecutor’s action as a “political move” to block the will of the people.
- Emphasising the AKP’s commitment to Turkey’s secular constitution.

The AKP suddenly gave priority to EU membership and stepped-up initiatives to meet EU criteria such as the amendment of Article 301, “Denigrating Turkishness”. On 3 April, Prime Minister Erdogan put the amendment on the parliamentary agenda. The amendment was passed in late April 2008. The issue had been pending for years. It was the basis for charges against journalists, including Hrant Dink and novelists, including Elif Safak, and Orhan Pamuk. Still, the amendment of article 301 was delayed for several reasons. The government was too busy with easing the law banning headscarves in Turkish universities, and the rise of nationalism and anti-EU sentiments also played a role in undermining the urgency of changing Article 301.

The Prime Minister’s emphasis on “more Europe” was echoed in the opinion of the AKP’s electorate. One opinion poll (the A&G Opinion Poll Group) showed that there was a sudden increase in the AKP electorate’s support for EU accession. The percentage of the AKP electorate agreeing that Turkey should be a member of the EU was 57.4 percent in 2005. This proportion dramatically decreased to 32.2 percent in 2006 and to 30.1 percent in 2008. In April 2008, the percentage of supporters was however on the rise again, reaching 41.9 percent.³

² Keyman, Fuat, “Many liberties endangered, not just headscarf”, in *turquieeuropeenne* February 27, 2008 Available at: <http://www.turquieeuropeenne.eu/article2509.html>

³ See: *Milliyet*, April 10, 2008.

Communicating enthusiasm for EU membership is important in order for Turkey to make progress on the issue in general. It targets two audiences: the EU officials and the European media; and the liberal urban middle classes in Turkey. It is crucial to regain the support of the liberals in Turkey, who distanced themselves from the AKP after the formation of a coalition with the National Action Party (MHP) to pass the constitutional amendments to lift the headscarf ban at universities. The support of the urban middle classes was attained with the acceleration of the EU harmonisation reforms in 2003 and 2004, but lost again with AKP's religion-oriented policy.

Civil-military relations: more civilian influence

The Turkish military has had a special role as a constitutional tool guarding the secular state. The military has a very popular image due to the widely-held conviction that the military does not only protect Turkey against internal and external enemies, but also ensures secularism and democracy.

Civil-military relations have shifted in the direction of increased civilian control under the EU harmonisation reforms of 2003 and 2004; the role of Parliament in overseeing the defence budget increased and several military officers stepped down from civilian oversight bodies. This change has recently been enhanced by decreased military influence on political issues and processes following the July 22 elections of last year. The Turkish military wields great power through informal mechanisms such as the public statements of generals. References in "military speeches" to developments in Turkey are taken extremely serious by Turkey's politicians, as they have learned the hard way over the years that the Armed Forces cannot be ignored. Since last summer the top military officials have tended to restrain their informal influence by decreasing the number of speeches and press statements on major domestic political issues: the headscarf ban, Cyprus, and the EU. What prevails is the military's informal influence on PKK terrorism. The military, particular the General Staff, employed their informal influence more often in 2006 and 2007 than this year. In 2007, the military issued 42 press releases and 73 press announcements; the Chief of General Staff Buyukanit made six public speeches and issued 10 messages in the website of the Turkish Armed Forces. In 2008 (to April 27), Buyukanit has made no public speeches, and issued only two messages; while the military has issued 27 press releases and six press announcements.⁴

What has caused this new reservedness on the part of the military? There was disappointment following the April 27 (2007) e-memorandum, signalling that the armed forces would not stay neutral - as guardian of the state's secular character - and that it would uncompromisingly defend the principle of secularism. The fact that it did not create the planned impact and did not lead to the government resigning, as had been the case in the previous years, was one of the reasons explaining their refrained vocalism. The second reason might be the press reports claiming that some military officials planned staging two coups during the first AKP rule (2002-2007). In March 2007, the Turkish weekly *Nokta* (March 29, 2007) reported such claims:

"The diary entries contain detailed plans for a military coup, prepared jointly by the commanders of the Army (Aytaç Yalman), Navy (Özden Örnek), the Air Force (Ibrahim Fırtına) and the Gendarmerie (Şener Eruygur) in 2004. According to the diary, it was only the opposition of the Chief of Staff at the time, Hilmi Özkök, who prevented the coup plans from being put into action. The code name for the coup was 'Blond Girl'. Later, these dairies suggest, Şener Eruygur had begun to plan another coup, codenamed 'Moonlight'."⁵

⁴ For the press statements and announcements, see www.tsk.mil.tr/10_ARSIV_1_Basin_Yayin_Faaliyetleri.

⁵ Quoted from: http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=281&story_ID=21&slide_ID=3.

This *Nokta* report created outrage and shock in Turkey. The military responded to the allegation in a speech on 11 April by General Chief of Staff Yaşar Büyükanit who “alluded to the publication of coup plans from the alleged diary by accusing some media outlets of using ‘information and documents, the sources of which are questionable’.”⁶ Following the speech of Büyükanit on April 11, *Nokta*’s offices were raided by the police in a three-day operation at the request of the military prosecutor. The owner of *Nokta* decided to shut down his media outlet. Before closing, another *Nokta* article on 5 April, which was based on a leaked report prepared by the Office of the Chief of General Staff, further challenged the public image of the military. It described a secret categorisation of press outlets and journalists into pro-military and anti-military groups. The claim was not denied by the military, although internal investigations were undertaken to uncover who was responsible for leaking the “blacklist”.

In responding to the *Nokta* allegations of planning a coup, Admiral Örnek claimed none of the diary belonged to him and filed a lawsuit against Editor-in-chief Alper Görmüş, for “action for libel”. Görmüş was acquitted in April. During the course of the hearings, “it was proven by a group of experts that the diaries did originate from the admiral’s computer. The court rejected the demand that this proof be taken into consideration in the case”, reported *Today Zaman*.⁷ Many celebrated the court decision, but expressed grievances that no investigation was initiated over the coup initiative.

Turkey’s southeast: DTP in Parliament and AKP-DTP tension

The DTP has attained parliamentary representation with the election of 20 representatives in the July 22 general elections. This was a significant change in the composition of the parliament as a pro-Kurdish party has not had any representation since 1991. The new composition of the 550-member Parliament included, for the first time, representatives of both the ultra-nationalist MHP and the Kurdish nationalist DTP.

Meanwhile, the AKP’s large number of votes in the southeast undermines the DTP’s claim that it is the sole representative of the Kurdish people. The DTP now perceives the AKP as a serious rival in the southeast of Turkey. Starting in August 2007, the AKP-DTP tension caused a crisis in Parliament and created tensions in society. The perceived organic ties between the DTP and the PKK is one of the sources of these tensions. The DTP is considered by many to be the political wing of the terrorist separatist organisation. After the final communiqué of a DTP-sponsored conference called the jailed PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, a “leader of the Kurdish people” and requested his release,⁸ the Prime Minister requested the DTP denounce the PKK as a terrorist organisation. The DTP has not clearly done so but individual DTP members made statements condemning terror and armed conflict in December 2007 and in January 2008. The DTP’s hesitation to declare the PKK a terrorist organisation created further tension at a time when the cross-border operation into Iraq was complicating matters. As a consequence, the Prime Minister refused to meet members of the DTP in March 2008 and stated that “the DTP did not declare the PKK as a terrorist group”.⁹ Later, NGOs of Diyarbakır, the main Kurdish powerbase in Turkey, visited President Gül in early April and also met with PM Erdoğan to demand wider use of the Kurdish language. They also asked for the establishment of a Kurdish studies institute at a university. The Prime Minister responded harshly, refusing to consider such demands.¹⁰

In order to increase its popularity at the cost of the AKP, the DTP occasionally turns to Islamic rhetoric and uses religious symbols in public activities, despite its leftist leanings and traditionally

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ See: *Today Zaman*, 19 April 2008.

⁸ See: *Today Zaman*, 1 November 2007.

⁹ *Hürriyet*, 13 March 2008.

¹⁰ *Hürriyet*, “Meclis’te Kurce Kavgası” (“Fight for Kurdish in the Parliament”), 9 April 2008.

secular identity. The AKP and the DTP will have to compete for the Kurdish vote in the upcoming 2009 local elections. The AKP seemingly lost some popularity after the military launched a cross-border operation against the PKK in February 2008. Following the large number of killings by the PKK in October 2007, and increased public pressure for a cross-border operation, the Turkish Parliament passed a motion from the Prime Minister to send soldiers into northern Iraq to fight the PKK. This was a disappointment for many Kurds, as the AKP skilfully postponed parliamentary approval of the operation before the general elections, although the operation marked the political agenda in the summer of 2007.

Conclusion

The increased polarisation, which has been caused by the perception of a *more Islam* policy of the AKP, is a negative factor in fostering more democracy and more Europe. The AKP government's focus on Islamic issues led to the bid to have the party banned, which has in turn provoked a crisis of democracy. In order to overcome the crisis, reconciliation is necessary. It requires leaders communicating *more Europe* and *more democracy*, and refreshing the consensual politics for any reform, such as a new constitution.

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