



FPC Briefing:

Turkey: Domestic challenges that will dominate AK Party government's third term

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One thing was certain about the June 2011 elections in Turkey: AKP would win. Yet speculation over whether or not it would earn a greater share of the vote was rife, as was the forecasting of how many votes the renewed leadership of the leading secular opposition party, CHP (Republican People's Party) would attract, or whether the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) would make the 10% threshold to enter parliament, or how many MPs the Kurdish BDP (Peace and Democracy Party) would have.

Smaller parties that represent socialist, communist, Islamist and liberal views have silent died out during the last 10 years. But these four leading parties continue to represent four major strains of public opinion in the country. AKP appeals to both culturally and religiously conservative segments with its tight-rope walk of traditional values and liberal market policies, along the line drawing criticism from Islamists who demand an Islam based society for not being Islamic enough and from nationalists and worried secularists for forcing a sinister Islamization of the country.

CHP continues to have the marketing of the party that Ataturk, the founder of Turkey, has set up and appeals to a hard core of Turks mostly living in Western Turkey and larger cities. The does not have any coherent political outlook as it shifts weekly from being a left wing social democratic party to die hard nationalist party against globalization and reform. Its main political stand is its self-declared war to keep the secular legacy of Ataturk alive.

MHP has traditionally been the primary nationalist movement in the country, which appealed to culturally and religiously conservative but yet at the same time nationalist segments that believe in a Turkish race and rule. Under its increasingly insignificant current leader, the party lost a huge constituency to AKP and other groups. No reform or change of language or policies seems to be on the horizon.

BDP is the last of a continuum of Kurdish parties that kept forming after each Kurdish party were shut down by the courts and most of their members were arrested or banned from politics. Its self claimed mission is to be the primary voice representing Kurdish concerns. Its current chaotic leadership and lack of political sophistication reduces it to being only politically active among Kurds, whose political views are as diverse as the broader Turkish public, who only hear radical statements made by BDP politicians cited in the nation-wide press.

Results of 2011 election

The election results were somewhat surprising in retrospect. AKP did indeed win the election and emerge as a single party government once again. More unexpectedly, however, it increased its share to 50%, although most analysts predicted result similar to, or less than, he still remarkable 47% the party won in the 2007 election. This time, AKP gained 326 seats, only a handful short of the 330 seats target, which would have granted the party a chance to pass constitutional reforms without a referendum, and the 367 seats needed for a supermajority which would enable the government to pass any legislation it wanted unilaterally.



Despite this minor shortfall, a 50% win is a rare achievement in any parliamentary democracy and has only been achieved a couple of times before in modern Turkey. AKP's polling has been steadily ascendant since the party first formed a government: it won more than 34% in 2002 in its first national election, followed by 42% in the 2004 local elections, then 47% in the 2007 national elections, with a drop to 39% in 2009 local elections.

The 2009 fall was largely because of failed AKP initiatives to improve democracy. Two of these were the so-called 'democratic openings' to address Kurdish and Alevi issues. As will be dealt at length later on in this briefing, the initiatives to address concerns of Kurdish citizens and end decades long armed conflict died prematurely and faced the risk of rekindling tensions in the process. For Turkey's Alevis, a religious and cultural minority estimated to be more than 15 million, a series of highly publicised meeting between civil society and governmental officials resulted in no change whatsoever. Alevis still demand that their places of worship are recognized as such, rather than official state policy that Alevis are Muslims thus should worship at state-owned mosques.

In addition, from 2007 and onwards, there were increasing concerns about the court cases opened against journalists and personal libel cases pursued by the Prime Minister. A very public clash between media mogul Aydin Dogan and Erdogan followed hefty tax punishments on the Dogan group, forcing the group sell some of its press outlets. When the arrests of networks- referred to as 'deep-state' in Turkey, accused of sinister plans to overthrow the government started being arrested from 2008 and onwards, some ultra-nationalist journalists too were arrested as part of those networks.

While most observers believe that in fact such networks that have controlled the Turkish state and blocked development of democracy in the country exist, there have been concerns over how the court process have been handled. But, most importantly the chaotic climate that saw pro and anti-government propaganda and threats brought a sharp sense of self-censorship to the Turkish press. Yet, today Turkish press continues to publish extra-ordinary reports and challenge major national taboos, which would have caused journalists to disappear or murdered just 11 years ago. It is in deed a paradox.

Thus, it was in deed a surprise to see an increase of votes for AKP in 2011 elections. The consensus is that AKP's dramatic gain was primarily about the economy. Turkey has survived the global recession, and in fact has grown considerably during it, which is addressed in detail later in this briefing. Second, while the AKP's tolerance of dissent and open criticism is a problem, it remains to be the only party with a robust vision that combines economic prosperity, global engagement and EU accession.

In contrast, there is not a single opposition party that echoes anticipations of the Turkish public and is able to challenge AKP on its economy and foreign policies. Opposition parties continue to build 'negative' campaigns that are centred on accusing AKP of with one or other populist sensitivities, such as 'selling the nation' or 'being a US tool to make Turkey a model Islamic nation'. There is a common sentiment that while AKP is far from perfect, it's the only option.

There were initial signs of a new opposition movement when the leadership of the main opposition party CHP changed. Its new but politically hidebound leader, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, increased the hype of a major blow to AKP rule, if not a possible CHP victory, the actual election showed only a limited increase in the CHP's votes. In 2007, under its previous leader Deniz Baykal, the party polled 20.85 % of votes. This year it polled 25.93% resulting in an increase of MPs from 112 to 135.



There were legitimate fears that the fast-crumbling nationalist party MHP would not even be able to break the 10% barrier to re-enter parliament. Sex tapes implicating some of MHP's leaders with extra-marital affairs released by unknown groups caused a crisis of confidence in the party as a whole. Thus, the 13% outcome of 2011 elections was seen as a small victory for the party's leadership, despite constituting a drop from 14.29% in 2007, and from 71 MPs to 54.

The second major winner of the elections after the AKP, however, was the BDP who entered the elections as a block of independent candidates. The Kurdish block saw an increase of votes to 6.62% from 5.2 % in 2007, and a substantial increase from 22 to 36 MPs in the new parliament. While the ratios of votes and parliamentary seats for Kurdish MPs might seem insignificant to outsiders, from the perspective of domestic realities of serious blockades Kurdish politicians faced in the election process, the increase number of Kurdish seats are a remarkable and positive development.

Post-election crises

However, not long after the results of the election were announced, Turkey were gripped by the controversy of which figures would actually be allowed to take their places in parliament. Nine newly elected MPs (2 from the CHP, 6 from the BDP, and 1 on the MHP's list) faced the risk of their seats revoked because of outstanding criminal cases against them, either in the 'deep-state trials' or trials of Kurdish politicians and intellectuals. The Supreme Election Board (YSK) has already stripped Hatip Dicle (BDP) of his seat, and passed it to the runner-up, an AKP candidate, thus increasing the AKP's seats to 327.

In a desperate bid to ride the waves of criticism following the arrests of serving and retired military officials over accusations of planning to violently overthrow the government, the CHP had nominated some of the imprisoned figures for the elections. It was a gamble on the CHP's part, which backfired. Following the outcome of the elections, the courts refused to release the accused men on the grounds that impunity provided to MPs does not apply to candidates who have ongoing court cases against them, and that such action would break the 14th amendment of the constitution banning legislative immunity. The CHP increased the stakes by refusing to let all of its MPs take the formal oath legally required to take seats in parliament.

While the CHP MPs still took their physical seats in parliament but had no legal claim to them, the CHP looked increasingly feeble. The CHP's calls for the release of its imprisoned MPs verged on demands that the AKP government interfere with the courts' ruling. The AKP stood its ground, saying it could not act illegally and that the CHP was to blame for nominating individuals in detention, knowing full well that they wouldn't be allowed to take their places in the legislature. The appointment as speaker of parliament of Cemil Cicek, seen as a trustworthy figure by the Kemalist establishment, enabled the CHP's leadership to find a way to end their protest and avoid any further loss of confidence and increasing ridicule of their 'brave' stand by the Turkish public.

However, no resolution has yet been reached on the BDP protest. The BDP not only refused to take its seats in parliament, but in a series of problematic and confusing public statements declared 'democratic independence'. Some of its politicians even proposed that Kurds should not pay taxes to the state but that the state should give money to Kurds. Some called for a new Kurdish parliament to be set up in Diyarbakir, the most important city with the highest number of Kurdish population. The political immaturity of the current BDP leadership and new attacks by the PKK only hardened the stances of other parties in parliament and the Turkish public. The AKP has returned to a nationalist discourse, the Turkish state retracted to harsh promises of retaliation and what the



Kurdish MPs will do next is unclear.

Outlook of the new Parliament

The fact that the AKP did not win a supermajority is a good and necessary safeguard on its exacerbating some of its negative tendencies, yet at the same time enabling stability and possibility of bold reforms in the country. The party cannot enact legislation on its own, which will force it to compromise and engage with other parties. This is of particular importance when the new constitution is being written. A new constitution without the involvement of opposition parties, whether Kemalist, nationalist, or Kurdish, would be incomplete and would cause serious long term instability.

Also, the composition of the new parliament is one of the healthiest in the recent history of the young Turkish republic. With more than 30 Kurdish MPs, and sizeable representation from important constituencies of the CHP and the MHP, as well as a major increase in the number of female MPs (from 50 to 78), Turkish parliament finally resembles a cross-section of modern Turkish society. It now includes a non-Muslim independent MP. While a single independent MP from the marginalised Kurdish bloc is not necessarily the best platform from which non-Muslims in the country can find a voice, this development might pressure the AKP and the CHP to put forward non-Muslim candidates and their concerns in the next election. This would be a most important sign of maturation of Turkish democracy.

The future of such a hope-inspiring parliament depends on an end to protests by Kurdish MPs and their return to parliament. A continuation of their protest would not only harm the possibilities of a major democratic breakthrough in the writing of the new constitution, but would also completely marginalise Kurdish concerns, thus removing any chance of a long term and healthy solution to ongoing Turkish-Kurdish tensions.

Domestic challenges

AKP's third term will be occupied with four major domestic challenges; ethnic conflict, military reform, constitutional reform and economy.

1) Turkish-Kurdish tensions

Turkey has travelled a long way since 2002 on the Kurdish question. Ten years ago, the official rhetoric was that there were no Kurds in the country, only 'mountain Turks'; even acknowledging a 'Kurdish problem' existed would result in lengthy jail term, as well as social stigmatisation and gross human rights abuses at the hands of shady state-backed networks. The use of the Kurdish language was seen as a crime, as was criticising the state response to the issue.

Torture and extrajudicial murders were common from the 1990s onwards, which only strengthened the violent resolve of the PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party), a Kurdish insurgency rooted in Marxism-Leninism that is officially listed as a terror organization by the US and EU, and provided it with a fertile recruiting ground as harsh government policies alienated Kurdish citizens. With every PKK attack, the stand of the Turkish public hardened, as did the brutal response of the Turkish state. In the process, Turkey created almost a million internally displaced persons,¹ the vast majority of whom were Kurds forced to move out of their villages and towns.

¹ See "Turkey: 2011 UNHCR country operations profile", UNHCR



Under the AKP government, the Turkish state has not only come to acknowledge Kurds but Prime Minister Erdogan himself has continually referred to the 'Kurdish problem'. The AKP's limited but significant steps have included lifting the ban on the use of Kurdish, allowing Kurdish language schools to be opened and a Kurdish channel to be created on the national TV network. Under the AKP, torture has almost stopped and lawless acts of kidnapping, extortion, and murder have diminished. It is, therefore, no surprise that the AKP attracted a notable amount of Kurdish votes, and for the first time Kurds came to see a Turkish government as providing them a possible solution.

The AKP's initiatives to enhance Kurdish political engagement in mainstream structures and bold talks of an amnesty for PKK fighters if they disarm have been encouraging signs that things might change. However, each time the government has come close to pushing through with such initiatives, progress has stalled as a result of new attacks on Turkish troops by often unidentified groups, assumed to be from various hard-line elements within the PKK. The AKP's weakness on the topic showed itself by a continual fall-back to nationalist populism after each attack or political incident. For example, when a group of PKK fighters returned to Turkey in June 2010, they, along with those who welcomed them, were arrested on charges that during their joyful homecoming celebrations they praised the outlawed PKK and its detained leader Abdullah Ocalan.²

Relations between the AKP and the Kurds hit rock-bottom when more than a thousand activists and politicians involved with the Kurdish Communities Union (KCK) were arrested. The AKP's silence on the closure of the Kurdish party DTP (Democratic Society Party) by the courts was also seen as selective democracy. After all, AKP itself had used democratic arguments to stop itself being shut down by the Kemalist judiciary.

While the country's political arena between 2007 and 2010 was dominated by the showdown between the AKP, the military, and Kemalist state officials, analysts were drawing attention to the growing disfranchisement of Kurds and increasing anger of a young Kurdish population who have not experienced the dark days of deep conflict as occurred during the state of emergency in Eastern Turkey between 1987 and 2002. Thus, no one was surprised when the PKK once again launched attacks on Turkish targets in July and August after a six-month-long self-declared ceasefire, just when it surfaced that the Turkish state was in formal talks with the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan over solutions to the problem.

The government, Kurdish politicians, and civil society groups all face major challenges. Firstly, the AKP has to restore confidence in Kurdish citizens that Turkey is their country, and that the government is their government too. This demands a halt to the AKP's use of nationalist discourse when new armed clashes occur and bold steps to move the debate on from an 'us' and 'them' polarisation. AKP has to ensure that serious accusations of human rights abuses and breaches by the security forces and judiciary in Eastern Turkey is investigated and that freedom of speech and opinion is upheld so that Kurdish voices can be heard and feel that they are equal citizens of the country.

Secondly, all the political and social actors have to find a way within mainstream diplomatic channels to improve the situation of Kurdish citizens and the ongoing crisis. There is a growing consensus among Turks and Kurds, and even military officials and PKK fighters, that the solution to the problem does not lie in the use of weapons and military tactics. A civilian and truly democratic project cannot be undertaken by one side alone; it necessitates both Turkish and Kurdish citizens forming new political and social attitudes. To this end, Kurdish politicians too should show their

² "10 arrested as trial begins in Turkey for Habur returnees", Hurriyet Daily News, 17 June 2010



resolve and compromise by publicly denouncing attacks by the PKK.

Current political ideas and language that dominate talks in Turkish and Kurdish circles are outdated leftovers from 20th century nationalism, empty Marxist-Leninist talk of revolution and the people's will, and romantic dreams for the creation of a new Kurdish country coated in language of a 'right to self-determination'. However, there is a silent but growing number of 'middle ground' voices who see equal citizenship under law, the upholding of human rights, and positive discrimination to enhance the economic and social development of Eastern Turkey as the ultimate solution.

Lastly, the situation requires a political means of disarming the PKK and securing the return of thousands of PKK fighters from Iraq, Syria and the Turkish mountains. This would be one of the most tangible and significant steps of normalization, and it will demand tremendous compromise from all parties involved.³

2) Civilian-military relations

In the middle of post-election tensions and increasing attacks by the PKK silent tension between the commanders of the Turkish armed forces and the government has been brewing. The armed forces have been distressed by the significant number of high-ranking serving and retired officers currently in detention on the grounds that they formed networks planning the overthrow of the government.

Unquestioning support of the armed forces by the public has been on the decline, and the men in uniform, who have always had unhealthy influence in Turkish politics, have not been able to achieve what they had so easily done before 2001: the shaping of the country the way they want. As the AKP increased its votes and changed legislation to allow civilian jurisdiction over military personnel, Turkish generals were forced to remain silent when, one by one, previously untouchable officers were taken to court on serious accusations.

Observers were forecasting a breaking point in the lead-up to this year's Supreme Military Council (YAS) meeting in August. The YAS brings together the state and the armed forces to decide upon high-level promotions and retirements. The armed forces have been demanding promotions for officers who are currently in the courts, which the government has refused on the legitimate grounds that this was against military regulations and indeed the law.

In the build-up to the YAS meeting, the Chief of the General Staff and the Commanders of Land, Air and Navy forces resigned from their post in late July, though the Commander of the Gendarmerie did not.

This was a historic event for many reasons. At the surface level, the resignations themselves were a historic first. At a deeper level, the fact that the top brass felt that they had no option but to leave bitter resignation letters behind, rather than try to seize power or send tanks into the cities, is a landmark sign of democratization in Turkey. Furthermore, the most important point is that their resignation led to nothing: no mass protests, no market instability, and no long term political or structural damage. In fact, even the staunchly secular and pro-military CHP did not raise any opposition and spoke of the need in liberal democracies for civilian control over institutions with special powers, such as the military, police, and intelligence services.

The AKP pushed through with the YAS meeting, appointed the Gendarmerie Commander Necdet Ozel as the Chief of the General Staff and speedily confirmed all of the promotions put forward by

³ For a detailed and excellent report on the topic see Cengiz Candar.



the armed forces. Both the armed forces and the government seem to be happy with the new appointments. However, record increases in the number of generals from 363 to 376 in 2010, and to 348 between 2003 and 2006, is seen as a political move by the armed forces.⁴ Yet, given the new power balances in the country and lack of public support for military interference in politics, whether the increase in numbers is of significance for national politics is moot.

The Turkish public remains divided and cautious on the recent resignations and the AKP's talks of reform. Some welcome this as a victory for democracy while a major portion of the public sees this as an important advance but are anxious about whether or not this will provide the government more scope for authoritarianism, and a smaller portion believe this to be the final Islamist takeover of the secular Republic.

While scaremongering theories of Islamist or authoritarian takeovers suffer from more speculation than granted by evidence, how the AKP will handle the new era of civilian-military relations does have major long-term implications. Now that the political hunger of the armed forces has been curbed, the anti-democratic framework of the current Turkish constitution can be tackled in a truly democratic fashion.

The new era, though, is not simply about a breathing space for civilian politics, but also a chance to undertake much needed reform and modernization of the Turkish armed forces. Advancement of civilian accountability on military spending is a must, as currently neither the public nor the state has any knowledge or say on the issue. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPR) 2010 report on Military Expenditure ranks Turkey as the 15th biggest military spender in the world, with an estimated expenditure of more than 15 billion US Dollars in 2010 and 2.7% of its GDP in 2009, a ratio that is lower than expenditure before AKP assumed office.⁵

Some serious questions have to be asked about the military's handling of the never ending Turkish-Kurdish clashes and its professional conduct in ensuring that the Turkish troops and military outposts are protected and provided adequately.

The fact that hundreds of officers are off duty due to court cases is weakening not only the morale of officers but also military structures. There are already plans to shorten compulsory military service and increase numbers of professional military personnel.

Yet this is not enough. Turkey needs a robust, flexible, and dynamic military force, not only for its own protection in a much troubled region, but also to provide muscle to its diplomatic power in the region and enhanced involvement in NATO operations. A thorough civilian review of the Turkish military is necessary, including an assessment of whether or not the army is equipped to cope with the complexities of new wars and increasingly non-territorial warfare.

3) Constitutional reform

For a long while, there has been a popular consensus that the Turkish constitution has to be addressed. The constitution was written in 1982 following a military coup and thus reflects a strong position protecting the state itself more than granting freedoms to its citizens. Subsequent governments made limited additions or alterations to cope with contemporary realities, but none went far enough to address fundamental problems.

The AKP has attracted widespread support with its promise to reform the constitution, much to the

⁴ See Lale Kemal, "Record increase in number of Turkey generals and admirals", *Today's Zaman*, 10 August 2011.

⁵ See SIPR's database at: <http://milexdata.sipri.org>



disdain of Kemalist statisticians, who see such proposals as an affront to their power, and their constituents who feared that constitutional change would open doors for Sharia laws and the Islamization of the country. Ironically, the number of Turks who want Sharia laws went down to 10% under AKP rule, from 26% in 1999.⁶ This is a common phenomenon in Muslim-majority states; whenever a conservative Muslim government is in power, the public's desire fades for more morality and fairness in politics verbalized in language of Sharia.

On 12th September 2010, the AKP held a referendum about 26 proposed changes to the constitution, regarding a range of key issues from civilian-military relations to judicial structures as well as opening the way for holding the officers behind the 1980 military coup to account for serious human rights abuses. The lead-up to the referendum saw intense public debate as all of the opposition parties campaigned for a No vote, even though the content of the changes was never really debated and the EU commission has welcomed the changes. In what was, in effect, a pre-election campaign against the AKP via constitutional reform, opposition groups hoped for a negative outcome, but the reform bundle was passed with 58% Yes and 42% No votes.

Buoyed by that affirmation, the AKP promised a complete overhaul of the current constitution but waited to fulfil that promise till after the 2011 elections. Now that the AKP has a strengthened mandate and it is clear that the public wants reform, the government seems set to start the process.

Yet, various challenges lie ahead. Firstly, the AKP must not force through a complete package via a referendum but ensure that opposition parties as well as civil society groups are consulted before any text is put to a vote.

Secondly, unlike the fears of foreign observers, what will be most contentious will not be on the spectrum of secularization to Islamization. The main tension will be over articles of the constitution that defines Turkishness, citizenship and language. Would the new constitution promote a concept of citizenship that still uses Turkish as the official language but acknowledges ethnic identities, such as Kurdish, as a positive background for its citizens? Or would it continue to stick to a rigid theory of a Turkish nation defined by one race, one language, and one religion?

Thanks to the pressures of EU accession talks and Turkish ratification of the European Convention of Human Rights (and therefore the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights) as well as all the major UN human rights covenants, the growing importance of the vibrant Turkish civil society and with all of its challenges a relatively free media, the chances of a deterioration of democracy in Turkey is not high. However, with Kurdish MPs refusing to partake in the process and nationalist factions seeing the editing of some articles as betraying the Turkish nation, an intense journey lies ahead.

There are two possible outcomes, that Turkey will climb up to the next level of a mature democracy and thus enable itself to flourish, or that a major chance will be lost and the new constitution will be a half-baked improvement with many structural problems left lingering.

4) Economy

Under the AKP government, the Turkish economy went from near bankruptcy in 2001 to being the 16th largest economy in the world and the 6th in Europe. Future forecasts on the Turkish economy seem optimistic. In fact, at a time when most of the world's economies have seen stagnation or recession, the Turkish economy grew 8.9% in 2010 and 11% during the first quarter of 2011. It is

6 "Türk halkına göre 'dinsel eşitlik' teori düzeyinde kaldığı sürece sorun yok!", Radikal, 18 November 2009.



one of the fastest growing economies in the world today. In 2010, every leading credit rating agency in the world upgraded Turkey's rating.

According to reports from the Turkish Exporters Assembly in June 2011, Turkey's exports will reach \$135 billion (US) in 2011, which is higher than Turkish government estimates and the previous trade record of \$132 billion.⁷ The Turkish government is aiming to reach \$170 billion in 2015.

Though direct foreign investment to the country dropped to \$9 billion dollars in 2010 from its record breaking \$22 billion in 2007 due to global economic trends, 2011 is seeing more funds coming into the country.⁸ It is no surprise that Forbes lists 36 billionaires in Istanbul, placing the city in 4th position after Moscow, London, and New York.

However, in 2011 potentially dangerous cracks have been revealed. Observers have drawn attention to the risks of overheating, a growing current account deficit, and high rate of unemployment. Due to national elections in June, the AKP has sought to handle the deficit by increasing foreign investment and staying away from fiscal tightening. Now that the elections are over and the markets are enjoying the stability of a business-friendly third term for the AKP, the government has begun addressing these concerns. Analysts believe that the challenge is manageable for the diverse and structurally sound Turkish economy.

How AKP will steer Turkey through the challenges mentioned above and talks of a new global recession will be key for its future survival, since economic growth is the primary source of its electoral success. Without economic success, the AKP becomes vulnerable to attacks on its reforming, nationalistic, and secular credentials.

⁷ "İhracat 135 milyar dolarla 2008 yılını geride bırakacak", Zaman, 4 August 2011.

⁸ See www.invest.gov.tr for up to date information.