

TURKEY'S FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND US-TURKISH RELATIONS

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Any analysis of the present political scene in Turkey has to begin with a sound reading of the elections which were held on November the third 2002.

The outcome of the elections had the impact of an earth quake on the Turkish political landscape.

The Turkish electorate discharged the majority of the center right and left parties which had ruled the country since the mid 1980's and ushered in a new comer on the political scene, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The AKP, by securing 34 percent of the vote was able to take over almost two thirds of the seats in parliament. Consequently, the party today is in a position that by gaining only two votes from among the five independents in parliament can easily reach the threshold needed to amend the constitution.

The victory of the AKP means political stability after a decade of ongoing instability stemming from the struggles of the coalition governments, most of which were composed of political parties identified with corruption and political expediency by the Turkish electorate, with only a few of them being the exception.

Yet, the AKP victory also highlights an anomaly in the Turkish political system. This stems from a legally imposed very high 10 percent election hurdle which in the 2002 elections had the impact of nullifying almost 44 percent of the votes cast. The hurdle is the highest in any European democracy.

This in return resulted in a disproportionate representation in parliament. The AKP which received one third of the votes secured two thirds of the seats.

Of the 31.5 million votes which were cast, 15.8 million (45 percent) were declared null and void. These votes having been cast for parties who did not receive the necessary 10 percent of the total were simply thrown aside. This figure equals almost the total populations of Israel, Ireland and at least two Baltic states.

By stating this I am by no means suggesting that the elections were not held in a fair and correct fashion. It simply means that as presently construed there is a representation problem in Turkish democracy.

The fact that the victor of the election was an offspring of the Islamist Welfare Party of Mr. Necmettin Erbakan makes the picture more confusing.

The Welfare Party was banned by the Constitutional Court in 1998 on the grounds that it was advocating Sharia, Islamic law.

This court decision was upheld by the European Commission of Human Rights in 2000 which was convinced of the evidence for closure.

The court in Strasbourg ruled that advocacy of Islamic fundamentalism does not comply with the freedoms granted by the European Convention of Human Rights.

The irony facing us is that the majority of the AKP deputies elected in November 2002 vote were former members of the Welfare Party and therefore shared political responsibility for the activities of that legally banned entity.

There is more to this irony. The AKP in its platform today and in its discourse drastically deviates from that formerly espoused by the Welfare Party.

It is trying to move to the center. By adding several prominent figures from center right-liberal parties to its election ticket, it displayed a considerable effort to appeal to centrist votes.

Indeed, the performance of the new government on many fronts suggests a transformation which would have been inconceivable in the 1980's or 1990's for an Islamist political party in Turkey.

In the course of the last 10 months, they have pursued a steadfast agenda to expedite Turkey's accession to the European Union.

They have delivered two landmark democratization packages to comply with the EU political criteria, including a major amendment curbing the powers of the National Security Council which was largely controlled by the military establishment.

They have concluded two major reviews with the IMF and were able to receive strong endorsement from this institution which resulted in the rescheduling of Turkey's debt payments to the Fund.

However, the ongoing debate in Turkey focuses on the sincerity of the changes which the AKP is going through. Much of the debate focuses on the pedigree of the party.

There are three identifiable schools of thought in this debate.

Proponents of the first school would strongly argue that the changes are genuine and that the performance of the AKP government to date corroborates this interpretation.

The second school argues that the whole story is a deception and that the party is nothing more than a sinister effort to deceive the whole nation. They claim the AKP has no true commitment to secularism, but rather has a hidden agenda whose purpose is to replace Ataturk's secularism with Islamic dominated government.

Finally, there is a third school... the skeptics. Their premise is that the Islamists have indeed embarked on a process of change, one which deserves encouragement, and that they are entitled to the benefit of doubt.

They would also argue that the secular institutions and elements of society should carefully monitor any potential efforts by the party to dilute the secular foundations of the republic.

Clearly, the AKP deserves some careful study and analysis. It would be fair to say that the party is still in a stage of transformation and represents a rupture in the evolution of political Islam in Turkey.

The fact that it is an eclectic structure, a coalition of many different political groupings, with a strong Islamist flavor suggests that the dynamics of change are in the making and as they expose themselves to the center, to the European Union and to the West in general, this interaction could lay the ground for moderation.

Not every group or individual in the party would go in the same direction. It may be useful to observe how these groups and individuals will play out against each other. The outcome will determine the depth and scope of the change.

For many political observers, what lies at the heart of the political controversy is the issue of confidence.

If the leadership of the ruling AKP manages to establish confidence in the system and in the society, this no doubt will help the party to entrench itself and enable it to exist as a permanent player on the political scene.

This largely depends on their ability to break away from their traditional Islamist agenda. Whether or not they will be held captive by their Islamist roots and agenda will be an important indicator.

These difficulties became apparent when the AKP government and the AKP majority in the Turkish parliament failed to deliver the famous motion for full cooperation with the United States for the northern front on March first.

Yet the episode of March first cannot be explained solely in terms of Mr. Erdogan's failure to control his group.

There was a whole constellation of factors which culminated in this road accident.

The episode is behind us. But if we are to ensure that the Turkish-US relationship does not run into similar accidents in the future, we must study and analyze this accident in an attempt to answer the question of "what went wrong".

An objective analysis reveals that both sides committed serious mistakes and blunders. There is a long list of miscalculations on both sides.

On the American side one could say that its heavy handed treatment of the newly elected inexperienced Turkish government was one of the major factors. The problem was the overconfidence of the US administration. The risks taken by the Bush administration in the presence of so many intangibles on the Turkish side were simply too high.

The US administration never fully understood the sentiments of the Turkish society, especially in the absence of a strong UN mandate. It was inevitable that this resentment would somehow be translated into the

On the Turkish side the biggest mistake of the government was to undertake too huge a commitment to deliver in parliament. There were perceptual problems as well. Many Turkish policy makers did not fully grasp the resolve of the Bush administration to overthrow the Saddam Hussein regime at any cost.

Then there was a joint mistake committed by both administrations. This was to define the scope of the military relationship as full cooperation.

Instead a modest level of cooperation limited to air corridors and perhaps the use of air bases would have been a much more reasonable and achievable option and would have saved the relationship from the hazards of failure.

Ironically at the end, the use of air corridors turned out to be the level of cooperation which was actually implemented.

The relationship suffered further damage due to the heavy handed reaction of some American decision makers after the accident.

Statements to the effect that Turks should acknowledge that they had made a mistake in parliament on March first, statements reflecting themes of "crime and punishment" led to growing anti US-sentiments and more frustration in the Turkish public.

These sentiments reached a peak when US forces with the help of Kurdish peshmergas raided Turkish special forces in Suleymaniyah on July the fourth and covered their heads with hoods, the kind of special treatment usually reserved for members of Al Qaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

It was ironic that the Commander of the US European Command General James Jones who visited Ankara to resolve this unfortunate event used the occasion to make a sounding as to whether Turkey could contribute troops to Iraq to help the US forces.

While Turkish and US military authorities were investigating the Suleymaniyah event, on a different military to military channel discussions had already begun regarding possible Turkish troop commitments for Iraq.

The symbolism here is worth underlining.

It highlights the fact that independent of their respective sentiments vis a vis each other, Turkey and the United States would often find that they share the same agenda, face the same stakes and have to work together to address common challenges.

The agenda very often dictates itself on the governments and the bureaucracies. And the agenda is not limited to Iraq.

It is relieving to see what appears to be a change of mood in Washington D.C. these days. The period in which the relations were held captive by emotions, the days when there was no room for rational thinking in the relationship are over.

Yet, the relationship now is face to face with a new crucial test.

This time the test centers on the question of sending Turkish troops to Iraq. The Turkish government and the Turkish parliament will soon decide on this issue which like its predecessor does not enjoy popular support in Turkey.

A UN Security Council resolution authorizing the presence of an international peace keeping force and an official invitation by the Transitional Governing Council of Iraq would undoubtedly ease the pressure on the government and parliament.

Also whether the United States will take concrete steps to eliminate the PKK groups in northern Iraq will have an enormous impact on the Turkish decision.

In addition, even if these conditions were to be met, the fact that Turkish soldiers could become targets of unknown assassins in Iraq already makes this decision a highly emotional one.

We should also bear in mind that both the treatment of Turkey during and after the northern front controversy and the raid on Turkish troops in Suleymaniyah by American forces still heavily impact Turkish perceptions.

Finally, in order to avoid the kind of downturn seen after the March first vote, it is important that this time the issue of sending troops should not be overemphasized in the relationship.