



Turkey's 2011 elections and beyond

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At Turkey's general elections on 12 June 2011, the governing Justice and Development Party (AK Party) won 50% of the overall vote. This was the first time that a ruling party in Turkey has increased its vote in a third term. In the medium term its biggest challenges will be drafting a new constitution, stabilising the economy, and negotiating changing regional relationships, but in the short term it needs to diffuse a crisis over MPs boycotting parliament.

The AK Party has been in power since 2002, presiding over an impressive rise in Turkey's strength and status after years of unstable coalitions and sporadic military coups. But there have been problems too, some of which were reflected in opposition parties boycotting the swearing-in of new MPs after the 2011 election because judges had barred nine MPs from taking their seats.

One of the AK Party's stated priorities is drafting a new constitution – partly to move away from the military influence in the 1982 constitution, but also reportedly to increase the powers of the Presidency. But it did not win super-majority that would have allowed it to change the constitution without the support of other political parties. The large group of Kurdish politicians in parliament will undoubtedly increase the demands for greater rights for Turkey's Kurdish minority. And there are fears that the government is becoming authoritarian, using the courts to clamp down on its opponents, including military personnel and journalists, and introducing widespread internet censorship.

Turkey's impressive economic growth has meant that the economy was not a significant issue at the Turkish election, though there are problems on the horizon. The main question is whether the AK Party government, which has only ever really known a rapidly growing economy, will be able to successfully slow down unsustainable growth.

Regional relations will continue to be a major issue: since 2002 Ankara has dramatically improved its relationships with capitals across the region, and the government is likely to continue with its policy of 'zero problems with neighbours'. However, its apparently haphazard response to the Arab Spring suggests that Turkey is learning to balance its national interest with its stated values. EU accession, on the other hand, was almost entirely absent from the election campaign, with no obvious effect. This indicates that Turkey is likely to continue with its current policy of restrained engagement with Brussels. But prospects for Turkish membership of the EU will also be shaped by the outcome of upcoming elections in France and Germany.

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Contents

1	Results	2
2	Context	3
3	Boycott of parliament after new MPs barred	3
4	What next?	4
4.1	A new constitution?	4
4.2	Greater rights for Turkish Kurds?	6
4.3	The ‘Ergenekon’ and ‘Sledgehammer’ trials	6
4.4	Censorship	7
4.5	Economy	7
4.6	Regional relations	8
4.7	EU accession	9
4.8	Building projects	10
4.9	A stronger opposition?	11
5	Further reading	11

1 Results

At Turkey’s general elections on 12 June 2011, the governing Justice and Development Party (AK Party) won 49.9% of the overall vote.¹ This was the first time that a ruling party in Turkey has increased its vote in a third term, and it allows the AK Party’s leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to continue as Prime Minister after nine years in power.

But despite this, the AK Party won fewer seats in parliament (326 out of 550 – now increased to 327) than it had in its second term (341 seats, on 46% of the vote).

The main opposition Republic People’s Party (CHP), under its new, more liberal, leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, won an increase from 112 seats to 135, on 26% of the vote. This was its best result for over 30 years,² but still not as good as its supporters had hoped.

There was also a significant increase in the number of seats won by independent candidates from 21 to 36 (5.8%), although one successful candidate has since been stripped of his seat and others are barred from attending parliament. These candidates are in fact allied with the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy party (BDP), but are running as independents to circumvent the constitutional rule requiring parties to obtain 10% of the national vote in order to enter parliament.

¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union PARLINE database, [Grand National Assembly of Turkey – Last elections](#) [accessed 30 June 2011]

² “Turkey election: Press hails Erdogan victory”, *BBC news online*, 13 June 2011

Only the hardline nationalist party, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), lost some support. At 13% of the vote it won 53 seats, down from 71 in 2007.

The elections were judged to be free and fair,³ and there was a high turnout of 87%,⁴ prompting the election to be hailed as “a really triumphant example of democracy in action”.⁵

2 Context

The AK Party has been in power since 2002, presiding over a rise in Turkey’s strength and status after years of financial instability, weak coalitions and sporadic military coups. Its commitment to free market economics, political reform and civilianisation has contributed to impressive economic growth, political stability and progress on EU accession. Erdoğan’s administrations have addressed some of the grievances of the country’s poor by introducing almost universal health care and increasing the availability of affordable housing.⁶ Turkey has become a much stronger international player, particularly in its region: it seeks to portray itself as a model of secular Islamic democracy (an image strengthened by the turnout and conduct of this election) and to apply its soft power in regional disputes, but also takes an outspoken position on occasion. As the American television presenter Charlie Rose put it: “Turkey doesn’t want to go east or west; it wants to go up.”⁷

But there have been problems too. The economy is now at risk of overheating, and unemployment remains high. Concerns over the AK Party’s Islamist tendencies led most notably to a 2008 court case attempting to close the party. A “Kurdish opening” has brought some improvements to the rights of Turkish Kurds but the issue is far from resolved. Attacks on press freedom and widespread internet blocking have caused concerns both inside and outside Turkey about authoritarianism. And Turkey’s EU accession process has now almost entirely stalled.

3 Boycott of parliament after new MPs barred

The new parliament had a turbulent start when both the CHP and the BDP boycotted the swearing-in of new MPs on 28 June 2011 because judges had barred nine MPs from taking their seats. The group of BDP MPs has announced that they will boycott parliament altogether until all their members are allowed to take what they perceive as their rightful seats in the assembly.

One MP, Hatip Dicle, was stripped of his seat by Turkey’s Supreme Election Board because he had been convicted of making statements supporting the banned Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK). His seat was given to the runner-up, Oya Eronat, who is from the AK Party, taking the governing party’s total to 327 seats. The other eight MPs were barred from attending parliament because they are in prison, even though they are still on trial and have not been convicted. Six are from the BDP and were arrested for belonging to the PKK; two are members of the main opposition CHP, imprisoned under the Ergenekon investigation into an

³ OSCE Parliamentary Assembly press release, *Turkish elections democratic, but improvements needed on fundamental freedoms*, 13 June 2011

⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union PARLINE database, *Grand National Assembly of Turkey – Last elections* [accessed 30 June 2011]

⁵ John Peet, “Turkey after the 2011 Election: Challenges for the AK Government”, *Chatham House (transcript)*, 5 July 2011

⁶ Sinan Ülgen, “Is Brussels the Loser in Turkey’s Elections?”, *European Voice*, June 15, 2011

⁷ Quoted in Dimitar Bechev (ed), “What Does Turkey Think?”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, June 2011, p7

alleged coup attempt;⁸ and one is from the MHP and is being held under the Balyoz investigation into another alleged coup.⁹ The opposition parties argue that they are entitled to parliamentary immunity.¹⁰

It is not clear what will happen if the MPs continue to refuse to be sworn in:

There are no constitutional or parliamentary rules governing what should happen if winning candidates refused to be sworn in.

There is a rule that if more than 5 per cent of MPs resign, their seats will be thrown open for by-elections, but as candidates cannot resign unless they have been sworn-in, it leaves the issue in a grey area.

After the oath-taking, MPs submit applications for the Speaker's post. Once a Speaker is elected, the next step is for the new government to unveil its programme for a confidence vote, after which parliament goes into recess until October 1.

Parliament sources said the legislature could remain open after a new Speaker was chosen to deal with the problems. They said elected MPs could take their oaths at another time.

Any decision to call by-elections would carry the risk of provoking more unrest in the south-east at a time when many people are hoping Erdogan will revive efforts to heal wounds and grant more rights to Kurds, to end an insurgency that has killed more than 40,000 people.¹¹

If more of the imprisoned MPs are disqualified, the AK Party could gain enough seats to take it past the 330 mark required for holding a referendum on the constitution without the support of opposition parties.¹²

4 What next?

Erdogan is now arguably the most powerful political figure in Turkey since Kemal Ataturk, the Republic's founder. He has won three consecutive elections, increasing his party's share of the total vote each time: an impressive achievement by any measure. Will he and his government implement their pre-election promises?

After his last election victory, he promised to be a bridge-builder, a prime minister for Turks from all walks of life. But in practice he proved to be an abrasive and divisive leader. His opponents will now be hoping he adopts a less confrontational style.¹³

4.1 A new constitution?

Following the 2010 constitutional referendum, AK Party leaders said that a new constitution would be a priority after the 2011 elections (as did the CHP). A new constitution would replace the current 1982 constitution, which was drafted in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup and (despite some amendments) still carries signs of that heritage:

⁸ See section 4.3 below

⁹ Dr Firat Cengiz and Dr Lars Hoffmann, "Parliamentary crisis: imprisoned politicians in Turkey", *Open Democracy*, 8 July 2011

¹⁰ "Turkey election: Opposition boycotts parliament oath", *BBC news online*, 28 June 2011

¹¹ "Boycott of parliament mars Erdogan's new term", *Financial Times*, 28 June 2011

¹² See section 4.1 below

¹³ "Turkey election: Victorious Erdogan pledges 'consensus'", *BBC news online*, 13 June 2011

The 1982 military constitution is an ideological document that privileges the state over the individual and nationalism over citizenship. Its aim has always been to defend the state and the regime from the individual and, by suppressing both ethnic minorities and the pious, ensure the continuity of a bureaucratic-military tutelage system.

Hiding behind Kemalism, the ideology named after the founder of Turkey, Kemal Atatürk, the document itself and the laws that were subsequently enacted have made Turkey a country of laws but not the rule of law. It is an arbitrary state that punishes people according to its ideological preferences. It superimposes an ethnic Turkish identity on a country with a myriad of identities. As such, the 1982 constitution has been the main impediment to addressing Turkey's Kurdish citizens' legitimate demands, whether seeking representation, expressing their cultural distinctiveness, or claiming their identity.¹⁴

There is widespread agreement that Turkey needs a more civilian, liberal, European constitution that provides a new system of checks and balances to replace military paternalism.

However, Erdoğan appears to have other motives too: he has made little secret of wanting to expand significantly the powers of the President of Turkey. The President already has substantive powers, not just a ceremonial role:¹⁵ he can veto laws, appoint officials, and name judges; and a referendum in 2007 backed plans to have future presidents elected directly instead of by parliament. But Erdoğan would like a US-style or French-style presidential system, almost certainly because he wants the presidency for himself (under his party's rules he is not eligible for another term as its chairman and therefore as prime minister). The election posters repeatedly showed Erdoğan with "2023" (the 100th anniversary of the Turkish Republic) written alongside, strongly suggesting that he wants to be in power for many years to come.¹⁶ He will need to move fast if the rules are to be changed before the next presidential elections, which are due by August 2012.

The AK Party had hoped to win the 367 seats in parliament (two fifths of the total) that would have allowed it to amend the constitution without the support of other political parties. Gaining 327 seats left it short not only of that mark but also of the 330 seats (two thirds) that would have allowed it to hold a referendum for constitutional change on its own.

The result is that the AK Party will have to seek consensus for constitutional reforms. This was reflected in Prime Minister Erdoğan's 'balcony speech' on winning the election, in which he called for conciliation and cooperation among all parties, not just those represented in parliament, as well as with civil society groups and academics.¹⁷ This would be the first time that Turkey has a constitution developed through consensus.

The government has not yet actually announced any concrete plans for constitutional reform, either process or content. It may be waiting until the way forward is a little clearer. For instance, the government's scope for movement depends partly on whether the AK Party gets more seats in parliament as a result of the disqualification cases. If it does not, Erdoğan is likely to have to set aside his presidential ambitions in favour of more modest constitutional reforms. However, it may be able to get the reforms through with the support only of the

¹⁴ Henri J Barkey, "[The Road to Turkey's June Elections: Crises, Strategies, and Outcomes](#)", *Carnegie Europe*, 9 May 2011

¹⁵ Turkish Constitution, art 104

¹⁶ John Peet, "[Turkey after the 2011 Election: Challenges for the AK Government](#)", *Chatham House (transcript)*, 5 July 2011

¹⁷ See "[Turkey election: Victorious Erdogan pledges 'consensus'](#)", *BBC news online*, 13 June 2011

nationalist MHP and not the main opposition CHP – which would probably give the new constitution a perceptibly nationalist hue rather than making it the consensual document which Erdoğan appeared to promise.

4.2 Greater rights for Turkish Kurds?

The large group of Kurdish politicians in parliament will undoubtedly increase the demands for political and constitutional reform to give Kurds greater rights. These demands include greater autonomy, the right to be educated in the Kurdish language, reform of ethnicity requirements for citizenship, and a general decentralisation of state power that could also prove popular with other political groups.¹⁸

The AK Party has shown few concrete signs of implementing such reforms after the election. Indeed, in contrast to 2007, its pre-election rhetoric in 2011 was aimed more at getting the nationalist vote than the Kurdish vote, and it does not appear to be in favour of any decentralisation of power. However, the appointment of Beşir Atalay as deputy prime minister responsible for the Kurdish opening and security is seen as a sign this matter is being given a higher priority.¹⁹

Tensions in the mainly Kurdish south-east of Turkey have been raised by the disqualification cases and boycott of parliament, and will be even more so if by-elections result.

There are some calls for the UK to put pressure on the Turkish government to improve Kurdish rights.²⁰

4.3 The ‘Ergenekon’ and ‘Sledgehammer’ trials

There are fears that the AK Party is using the courts to clamp down on its opponents. By June 2011, over 300 actual or suspected opponents of the government had been charged with membership of ‘Ergenekon’, allegedly an organisation consisting largely of military officers, journalists and politicians that planned to overthrow the AK Party government. There have been many criticisms of the trial process, and allegations that the investigation is being run by pro-AKP elements in the police force, but voicing such claims publicly has apparently led to arrest and imprisonment on charges of belonging to Ergenekon.²¹

In what has become known as the ‘Sledgehammer’ case, over 200 serving and retired officers have been arrested and imprisoned on charges that the military planned assassinations and bombings in an attempt to destabilise the ruling AK Party. The military maintains that it was only a war-game scenario, modelling an imaginary situation. The arrests continue: in late May, General Bilgin Balanlı, who was in line to be appointed the next air force commander in August, was arrested, meaning that it is no longer clear who will succeed General Hasan Aksay as commander of Turkey’s strongest military force.²²

¹⁸ “Turkey election: Challenges for Erdogan’s third term”, *BBC news online*, 13 June 2011; Ömer Taşpınar, Steven A Cook, Henri J Barkey, *Turkey After the June 12 Elections: Challenges and Opportunities* [summary of a 15 June 2011 Carnegie Europe conference]; “Kurd poll gains spur demands for autonomy”, *Financial Times*, 13 June 2011

¹⁹ Taha Akyol, “A cabinet of technocrats that raises hopes”, *Milliyet*, 7 July 2011 (in Turkish)

²⁰ John Austin *et al*, “Kurdish success in Turkey’s elections”, *Letter to the Guardian*, 4 July 2011

²¹ Gareth Jenkins, “Turkey’s election, and democracy’s shadow”, *Open Democracy*, 21 June 2011

²² “Turkish generals’ arrest throws air force into chaos”, *Jane’s Intelligence Weekly*, 21 June 2011

4.4 Censorship

In April 2011 there were 57 journalists in prison in Turkey – more than in any other country in the world, including China and Iran, according to the International Press Institute and figures from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).²³ These numbers could increase further, following a decision of the Constitutional Court on 2 May 2011 to amend the Press Law to allow prosecutors to file criminal cases against journalists years after their articles were published.²⁴

The government is planning to introduce mandatory internet censorship, to protect Turkish youth from “harmful elements on the web”. The controls are due to come into force on 22 August 2011, and would give internet users the choice of four levels of filtering: “standard”, “children,” “family” and “domestic”. All the packages will block certain websites, and the filtering criteria will not be public.²⁵ The policy provoked protests across Turkey in May and attacks by the international “hactivist” movement ‘Anonymous’ that briefly shut down two government websites and resulted in 32 arrests.. This is not Turkey’s first attempt at internet censorship: it has repeatedly blocked access to YouTube in recent years.²⁶

4.5 Economy²⁷

Turkey’s impressive economic growth has meant that the economy was not a significant issue at the Turkish election, though there are problems on the horizon.

Its economic performance since the culmination of a severe and drawn-out economic crisis in 2001 has been exceptional: the economy has quadrupled in size, whilst per capita incomes have more than trebled. More recently, the 2010 figure of 8.9% far exceeded most forecasts, and it looks set to experience growth of 6.5% in 2011.²⁸

Turkey’s recent growth has been built on high levels of private consumption and investment, which have been fuelled by low borrowing costs. In an attempt to restrain the growth of private credit and prevent the economy from overheating, the Central Bank of Turkey has taken measures to limit the extent of banks’ lending (i.e. credit supply), but importantly, it has not sought to limit credit demand through raising interest rates.²⁹ The approach has been criticised for failing in its objective and neglecting to tackle an emerging economic bubble:³⁰ the value of outstanding credit grew by 35% in April 2011, compared with a year ago, and the first quarter 2011 GDP figures showed the economy growing at a rate that was among the fastest in the world.³¹

Further questions over the sustainability of Turkey’s growth are raised by its current account deficit, which is expected to reach 10% GDP in 2011.³² This is largely a consequence of the country’s dependency on imports, particularly of energy, combined with the appreciation of

²³ “Stephen M Ellis, “OSCE Report Finds Turkey Is Holding 57 Journalists in Prison”, *International Press Institute*, 4 April 2011; “OSCE media freedom representative presents study showing that more than 50 journalists are imprisoned in Turkey, calls for legal reforms”, *OSCE press release*, 4 April 2011

²⁴ “Internet filtering and changes to press law further limit media freedom in Turkey, says OSCE media freedom representative”, *OSCE press release*, 17 May 2011

²⁵ *Ibid*

²⁶ “Turks arrest 32 alleged Anonymous hackers”, *Telegraph*, 13 June 2011

²⁷ By Gavin Thompson, Economic Policy and Statistics Section

²⁸ OECD *Economic Outlook No.89*, May 2011

²⁹ See, for instance, Central Bank of Turkey *Summary of the Monetary Policy Committee Meeting*, 23 Jun 2011

³⁰ See, for instance, FT *Economy: Revival masks a lack of reform*, 27 June 2011

³¹ FT *Concern as Turkish growth hits 11%*, 30 June 2011

³² OECD *Economic Outlook No.89*, May 2011

the Turkish *lira* that has accompanied economic growth. This deficit has been financed largely by short-term inflows of foreign capital, leaving Turkey vulnerable should these dry up in response to economic developments elsewhere (especially rising interest rates in the eurozone and the US).

Over the next few years, it is likely that the pace of economic expansion in Turkey will slow, and the question is whether the AK Government, which has only ever really known a rapidly growing economy, will be able to gently deflate the bubble. In doing so, it may also be compelled to address barriers to more sustainable growth, including a large shadow economy and declining international competitiveness driven by rising wages; it has not to date shown enthusiasm for tackling these issues.

4.6 Regional relations

Since the AK Party came to power in 2002, Turkey has dramatically improved its relationships with capitals across the region through diplomatic engagement, fostering mutual trade, and opening borders. These efforts to establish Turkey as a major regional 'soft' power after decades of disengagement with the countries to its east and south-east are very popular in Turkey, and widely applauded by other countries. The government is therefore likely to continue with the policy of 'zero problems with neighbours' championed by foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. But it has been suggested that Turkey is learning to balance hard regional interests with its stated values, as all major powers must do:

like any major power, Turkey bases its foreign policy on calculations of hard national interests, and coats it in value-laden rhetoric that reflects popular sentiments.³³

The Arab Spring caught Turkey off-guard, perhaps damaging Turkey's claim to special insight into the dynamics of the Middle East and certainly exposing the rifts between an ethical foreign policy and the national interest:

On one hand, Prime Minister Erdogan was swift in calling for the removal of the unpopular ex-Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and ex-Tunisian president Zein Al Abideen Bin Ali. Yet he was far more reticent with Libyan leader Moammar Qaddafi, who signed \$ 15 billion of contracts with Turkish companies.³⁴

Turkey initially opposed the Western-led military action in support of the Libyan rebels; but in early July – after most Turkish citizens in Libya had returned home – Davutoğlu announced that his country recognises the rebel Transitional National Council as the true representative of the Libyan people.³⁵

Turkey was also slow to condemn Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's crackdowns against protesters – it appeared reluctant to jeopardise the links with Assad's regime that it had recently forged after years of hostility. This approach has now been replaced by a recognition that change is needed; but both cases show the difficulty of maintaining 'zero problems with neighbours'.

Turkey has nevertheless shown some leadership in the region, for instance in coordinating and hosting the Libya Contact Group in Turkey in July 2011.³⁶ And in general Turkey's

³³ Mustafa Akyol, "Turkey's Maturing Foreign Policy: How the Arab Spring Changed the AKP", *Foreign Affairs*, 7 July 2011

³⁴ Fadi Hakura, "Turkey's general election: a game of numbers", *Chatham House Expert Comment*, 9 June 2011

³⁵ Mustafa Akyol, "Turkey's Maturing Foreign Policy: How the Arab Spring Changed the AKP", *Foreign Affairs*, 7 July 2011; "Libya: Turkey recognises Transitional National Council", *BBC news online*, 3 July 2011

³⁶ "Libya Contact Group to convene in Turkey next month", *Today's Zaman*, 9 June 2011

success in integrating Islam, democracy and economic growth is often seen as making it an attractive model for the countries of the Arab Spring.

However, the revolutions are shifting the regional balance of power.

Turkey's relationship with Iran and Syria came to symbolise the much vaunted "zero problems with the neighbours" policy after decades of hostility. Nowadays, Turkey's sponsorship of the Syrian opposition and tacit support of Saudi Arabia rather than Iran over Bahrain has fractured those relations. Any implosion of Syria may further complicate ties between Sunni-tilting Turkey and the Iran-Iraq-Syria Shiite triangle.

Overall, Turkish regional influence will be circumscribed by Egypt's foreign policy assertiveness, US support of Israel and Iranian proclivity to flex its muscles in Iraq, Lebanon and the Gulf Arab region. Additionally, the increasing dependency of Turkey on Iran's hydrocarbon supplies to satisfy a rising domestic appetite will limit aspirations.³⁷

Iran and Israel pose particular problems for Turkey. Iran is a rival for regional power, with Iraqi Kurdistan being a battleground for influence. While Turkey's mediating stance on Iran's nuclear weapons may have earned it some friends, others are keen that Turkey stay more in line with the rest of Europe. Relations with Israel were strong for a time, and Turkey even took the role of neutral broker in talks between Syria and Israel. But they were seriously damaged by the 2008-2009 Israel-Gaza conflict and the 2010 *Mavi Marmara* incident during which eight Turkish citizens attempting to break the Israeli naval blockade of Gaza were killed by Israeli forces. Israel-Turkey relations are not likely to be repaired for some time.

In the longer term, the emergence of a strong, democratic Egypt could diminish Turkey's 'soft power' in the Middle East: for example, the recent Fatah-Hamas agreement was brokered by Egypt, not Turkey.³⁸ Whatever happens, the picture is changing and Turkey will have to adapt its foreign policy as a result.³⁹

4.7 EU accession

EU accession – once a hugely popular prospect in Turkey – was almost entirely absent from the four main parties' election campaign, with no obvious effect:

In the governing AKP's 2011 election manifesto only 2 pages (of a total of 160) were dedicated to Turkish relations with the EU. Here the AKP promised to continue to pursue the objective of EU membership while voicing disappointment and criticising the EU for breaching its own principles particularly by not being impartial in the Cyprus issue and refusing to close chapters in Turkey's accession negotiations. Thus, the AKP did not present any strategy to overcome the current stalemate of Turkey-EU relations. [...]

Similar observations could be made for the three parliamentary opposition parties: the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi; hereafter CHP) [...] rid itself from the previous leadership's fundamentally anti-EU attitude. Nevertheless, still, the party's election campaign was dominated by internal economic and social policy issues with minimum role for the EU.

³⁷ Fadi Hakura, "Turkey's general election: a game of numbers", *Chatham House Expert Comment*, 9 June 2011

³⁸ Ömer Taşpınar, Steven A Cook, Henri J Barkey, *Turkey After the June 12 Elections: Challenges and Opportunities* [summary of a 15 June 2011 Carnegie Europe conference]

³⁹ See Henri J Barkey, "Turkey and the Arab Spring: Q&A", *Carnegie Europe*, 26 April 2011

The same was true for the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi; hereafter BDP) [...]. BDP is generally known to have a positive opinion on the EU, since the EU has been the main catalyst in the improvement of minority rights in Turkey. Nevertheless, in the context of this last elections, in contrast to previous elections, the BDP did not make any specific reference to the EU.

What was maybe most striking in the run-up to the election was the position of the right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi; hereafter MHP). [...] Considering the shift in public opinion on EU membership it could have been expected that a nationalist party would campaign on an anti-EU ticket or at least on a Eurosceptic one. This pattern was observable, e.g. in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland where right-wing parties gained significant support by cashing in on raising negative sentiments vis-à-vis the European Union. Nevertheless, like other major political parties, the MHP did not make a specific reference to the EU in its campaign, even in a negative tone.⁴⁰

This suggests that Turkey is likely to continue with its current policy of restrained engagement with Brussels. The government has on the one hand established a new European Ministry under Egemen Bagis, Turkey's chief negotiator for EU membership, which could be an indicator of increased commitment.⁴¹ But on the other hand Turkey's ambassador to the EU, Selim Kunalalp, has said that Turkey will no longer take EU recommendations into account in its constitutional reforms:

The European Commission's recommendations will be taken on board to the extent that they reflect universal norms. Take the death penalty [which Turkey abolished in 2004]. Whether or not you want to join the EU, it's a good thing to abolish the death penalty. But in the absence of any clear perspective of accession, there's no reason why Turkey should align its legislation toward narrow EU standards. To put it simply, the EU has lost its leverage on Turkey.⁴²

Progress would require movement on the Cyprus problem, which is blocking most of Turkey's remaining negotiating 'chapters', as well as concrete measures to improve freedom of expression and other matters in Turkey.

But prospects for Turkish membership of the EU will also be shaped by the outcome of upcoming elections in France in 2012 and in Germany in 2013:

Only the replacement of the current Turkey-sceptics [in France and Germany] with new leadership more willing to open a place for Turkey in Europe can change the underlying dynamics of Turkish accession. Last week's [Turkish] election results have shown that this momentum will not be generated by a frustrated Turkish electorate.⁴³

4.8 Building projects

Before the 2011 election Erdoğan promised several grandiose building projects including a new canal linking the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara, a new city outside Istanbul, a third airport and a third bridge over the Bosphorus. These are exciting prospects for many Turks, but the projects would have high environmental costs.

⁴⁰ Dr Firat Cengiz and Dr Lars Hoffmann, "[Parliamentary crisis: imprisoned politicians in Turkey](#)", *Open Democracy*, 8 July 2011

⁴¹ "[Erdogan intensifies Turkish effort to join EU](#)", *Independent*, 7 July 2011

⁴² "[EU has lost its leverage on Turkey', ambassador says](#)", *EU observer*, 20 June 2011

⁴³ Sinan Ülgen, "[Is Brussels the Loser in Turkey's Elections?](#)", *European Voice*, June 15, 2011

4.9 A stronger opposition?

Finger-pointing in the CHP had already begun in the aftermath of the election, and Kılıçdaroğlu's political future is uncertain with such infighting taking place. Kılıçdaroğlu has changed the discourse of the CHP, moving it away from its focus on Kemalism, nationalism and secularism to broader concerns over economic growth, press freedom, and authoritarian tendencies in the current government. It no longer relies so heavily on support from the army and the Turkish judiciary. Some commentators suggest that the CHP's best hopes lie in continuing this trajectory.⁴⁴ A stronger opposition is widely seen as being in Turkey's best interests.⁴⁵

5 Further reading

Gülnur Aybet and Filiz Başkan, "Constitutional Overhaul?", *The World Today*, July 2011

Mustafa Akyol, "Turkey's Maturing Foreign Policy: How the Arab Spring Changed the AKP", *Foreign Affairs*, 7 July 2011

Dimitar Bechev (ed), "What Does Turkey Think?", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, June 2011

⁴⁴ Ömer Taşpınar, Steven A Cook, Henri J Barkey, *Turkey After the June 12 Elections: Challenges and Opportunities* [summary of a 15 June 2011 Carnegie Europe conference]

⁴⁵ See for example Sinan Ülgen, "How to Read the Outcome of Turkey's Elections", EURACTIV, 10 June 2011