

Turkey: has the AKP ended its winning streak?

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Since the conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) took power in Turkey in 2002, it has enjoyed a constant winning streak: it won each election (with a support level of 49.83% in 2011), subordinated the army (which had *de facto* stood above the civilian government) and was reforming the country. The situation in the country was stable (especially when compared to the crises and restlessness in the 1990s), the economy was booming, Turkey's position in regional politics was strengthening, and Ankara's significance on the international arena was growing. This encouraged the ruling class to make long-term plans, leading up to the hundredth anniversary of the republic in 2023. In the coming decade, Turkey governed by the AKP was to become one of the global economic and political centres, a full member of the EU and at the same time a political and economic leader in the Middle East.

However, the negative trends in the situation both domestically (mass public protests, the deadlocked Kurdish issue and the unsuccessful attempt to amend the constitution) and abroad (the war in Syria and the coup in Egypt) seen over the past few months have laid bare the limitations of the AKP's rule and have affected the government's democratic mandate, prestige and credibility on the international arena, as well as peace and order and domestic security.

When compared to the beginning of 2013, the way the situation will develop in Turkey is at this moment definitely less predictable; and the possible scenarios include both relative peace (however, with socio-political tension present in the background) and the threat of destabilisation. Therefore, although the AKP will still remain the sole major political force, this party will have to face challenges which will decide not only its political future but also the directions the country will be developing in. However, a comprehensive solution of the accumulated problems and a simple return to the *status quo ante*, convenient to the government, seem unlikely in the foreseeable future.

Protests in Gezi Park: social tension is growing

The protests which commenced in the last days of May in Istanbul and were repeated irregularly on a smaller scale also this autumn were the first sign of public dissatisfaction under the AKP's rule to be so clear. The protests were sparked by a local issue (resistance to the plans to liquidate Gezi Park in the centre of Istanbul). However, they quickly developed into massive political demonstrations, expanding across

most major urban centres, where participants expressed their resistance to police brutality, self-censorship in the media, the arrogance and the arbitrary and confrontational style of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's policy, and the government's decision concerning moral issues (including restrictions on the sale of alcohol).

As seen from a broader perspective, the protest was a manifestation of the dissatisfaction which part of the public (above all, the secular middle class) has with Turkey's political system, which is democratic in terms of electoral procedures, but

is far from being a liberal democracy as regards political culture and the system of values. This is what makes the protests which were initiated at Gezi clearly distinct from the 'Arab Spring' (a social revolt against decades of dictatorship and poverty), to which they have been compared, and rather brings them closer to the tradition of protest movements existing in the Western world.

These protests have not shaken the support for the ruling party; the uncompromising stance taken by the prime minister has met with approval among the conservative part of the Turkish public (the approval rating for the AKP was 43.2% in July as compared to 35.3% in June; data from Metropoll). However, they have caused an upsurge in domestic tension, far-reaching social polarisation, an increase in the AKP's negative electorate (which has not, though, translated into growing support for any of the existing opposition parties), and a clear deterioration of the government's image in the international community.

For this reason, the government has been making attempts to regain the initiative. On 30 September, Prime Minister Erdoğan announced the content of the Democratisation Package, aimed at improving democratic standards in the country. Some elements of this package are definitely major changes as compared to the previous history of the Republic of Turkey. These include the final removal of restrictions – with the exception of the judicial system and law enforcement agencies – in the dress code of state officials (the headscarf issue), the new possibility for private schools to be opened which do not have Turkish as the language of instruction (in response to the national aspirations of the Kurdish minority), the right to hold electoral campaigns in the languages of ethnic minorities, and lowering the support level (from 7% to 3%) received by a party in an election required for it to get funds from the state budget. The prime minister has also announced that a discussion on a possible reduction of the 10% electoral threshold will commence. Never-

theless, the wait of many months for this package which was kept secret until the last moment, turned out to contain changes which, although to the liking of the conservative Sunni Turkish majority, are definitely below the expectations of the ethnic and religious minority groups. This is not only in comparison to the maximum programme suggested by the Kurdish minority (education in minority languages at public schools and an immediate reduction of the electoral threshold) but also in comparison to speculation in the press preceding the announcement of the package (the expected changes included the right to use the Kurdish language at public

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institutions, official state recognition of the Alevi minority, changes in legislation regarding combating terrorism and the Greek Orthodox theological seminary at Heybeli island – closed since the 1970s – being re-opened).

Given this situation, the package may help the AKP temporarily rebuild its tarnished image. However, this is a policy of limited concessions, which have not been consulted with the groups they concern and which have *de facto* been given to the public arbitrarily by the prime minister and the confrontational approach towards critics is still in place; taken together, this is rather unlikely to ease the social tension, nor will it remove the causes which brought about the public unrest this summer.

All this will make it difficult for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to capitalise politically on the package, which under different circumstances would have restored his old reputation as a reformer and democrat to a certain extent. This is espe-

cially so since the autocratic style of his policy seems to be one of the key causes of the protests. However, barring a deterioration in his health (it has been speculated for years that he has cancer), Erdoğan looks set to be a constant element in the Turkish political landscape.

Therefore, as elections loom (a local election is scheduled for March and the presidential election for summer 2014) more manifestations of public dissatisfaction should be expected. There is no risk that the AKP will lose the election.

The coup in Egypt laid bare Turkey's isolation in regional politics. The situation in Syria is generating ever more threats to stability and security in Turkey.

What is at stake is the level of support it garners and the strength of its democratic mandate. At present, the excellent result achieved by the party in 2011 (49.83%) allows Prime Minister Erdoğan to claim that his policy is unconditionally backed by 50% of the public.

Nevertheless, even if the AKP's victory is convincing, its continued rule (with the present political approach continued) will result in an increasingly tense atmosphere in public life which will tarnish the image of Turkey as a democratic and stable state. As Suat Kınıklıoğlu, a former prominent member of the AKP, admitted in his column in the "Today's Zaman" daily: "Even if the ruling party garners 60 per cent of the vote in March, there will be no peace in this country."¹

In this context, given the strong Turkish tradition of radical political movements (leftist, nationalist, Islamic and also those combining the elements of various ideologies), it is possible to envisage the protests taking on a more radical form and extremist groups becoming activated. The attack on the central police headquarters in Ankara (victimless) launched at night on 20 Sep-

tember by one of the leftist terrorist organisations "in retaliation for the deaths of six people" during the Gezi and later protests was possibly a portent of this.

The Middle East: more threats than opportunities

Another front which carries great challenges at home and abroad is the policy towards the Middle East. The AKP's political identity is a key element of a broader project in foreign policy which provides for building Turkish influence in the areas of the former Ottoman Empire and a part of this is its openness to the region.

Turkey's political and economic position in the Middle East, which has seen uninterrupted growth since 2002 owing to the AKP's policy, has been strengthening Ankara's aspirations to regional leadership, raising Turkey's rank in the international arena and bolstering the AKP's legitimacy at home.

The outbreak of the Arab Spring was seen by the Erdoğan government as an opportunity for an accelerated fulfilment of its ambitions. By offering strong support to the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, whose views have a certain degree of affinity to those of the AKP, and to the opposition in Syria², Turkey was hoping it would become a senior political partner for Cairo and one of the key forces that would deal the cards in post-war Syria. However, the coup in Egypt laid bare Turkey's helplessness and isolation in regional politics. In turn, the way the situation is developing in Syria (increasing radicalisation of the opposition forces³, and

¹ http://todayszaman.com/columnistDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=326087

² Offering shelter and support (logistics, training and equipment) to the opposition political and military structures, making its territory available for the transfer of personnel and weapons, and also medical treatment and the redeployment of forces, and, last but not least, lobbying for international intervention.

³ At present, around 1,000 various factions are reportedly fighting in Syria, almost half of which are radical Islamists. Cf. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/world-news/middleeast/syria/10311007/Syria-nearly-half-rebel-fighters-are-jihadists-or-hardline-Islamists-says-IHS-Janes-report.html>

in fact the disintegration of the country) is causing Turkey to worry about the fact that the border between the two countries is about 900 km long and the threats originating from Syria are becoming increasingly painful for Turkey.

The risk that the conflict will spill over to Turkey is real. This country has already accepted over 500,000 refugees⁴ (according to UN estimates, this number could grow to one million by the end of this year⁵). Since the situation in Syria is permanently unstable, it is difficult to predict when they will be able to return. This means not only a significant financial burden⁶ but also a serious destabilising factor. The scale of this phenomenon has led the government to start losing control of the human flow across the border, which enables movement between the two countries not only to refugees but also to smugglers, Muslim radicals, the Syrian secret services and PKK militants.

One vivid example of the threats this is posing is provided by the terrorist attack in Reyhanlı, a small frontier town, in May this year, where 52 people were killed (the circumstances of this attack remain unexplained). Clashes between Turkish law enforcement agencies and groups attempting to illegally cross the border have also been observed.

Furthermore, given the special features of the frontier area, which in ethnic and religious terms is in fact an extension of Syria, the situation in Syria is immediately affecting the area on the Turkish side of the border. The fact that Sunni insurgents backed by Ankara are crossing the border and the mass influx of refugees mostly Sunni Arabs opposed to the regime is generating tension between Kurds living on the Turkish side of the border (who support the

Kurdish movement in Syria, which the Islamic insurgents are fighting, with Turkey's support) and the Alawite Arabic minority (who support the regime in Damascus). This especially gives rise to threats in the frontier province, Hatay, where tension resulting from war and the influx of refugees is becoming mixed up with the tension generated by the recent public protests (three people were killed in clashes with the police in this province). At the same time, information has been received that Turkish citizens are leaving for Syria to take part in the 'Jihad' against the Bashar al-Assad regime (it is difficult to estimate the scale of this phenomenon)⁷.

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As the conflict is continuing, Turkey's political and territorial engagement in it is increasing. At the same time, its influence on the developments in Syria is constantly diminishing and the threat that instability will spill over is growing as are Turkey's financial and political costs, both at home (72% of the public are opposed to the intervention⁸) and in the international arena.

All this is calling into question not only the future shape of Turkey's relations with the Middle East and the future of the 'neo-Ottoman' project, but also the country's security and stability. This is even more pertinent since, even if al-Assad is defeated, the scenario which Ankara desires most, Turkey will remain with a durably unstable neighbourhood.

⁴ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224>

⁵ http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/flash_read.php?ID=142

⁶ Since the beginning of the conflict, the refugee maintenance cost has exceeded US\$1 billion, data from ICG: [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/225-blurring-the-borders-syrian-spillover-risks-for-turkey.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/225-blurring-the-borders-syrian-spillover-risks-for-turkey.pdf)

⁷ http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/radikal_turkiyeden_suriyeye_savas_icin_goturulenlerin_ailerleriyle_konusturadiyaman___suriye_cihat_hatti-1152993

⁸ <http://trends.gmfus.org/survey-u-s-european-and-turkish-publics-oppose-intervention-in-syrian-conflict-favor-democracy-over-stability-in-mena-region/#lightbox/0/>

Kurds: a deadlock in the peace process?

The attempt to settle the issue of the Kurdish minority in Turkey is also becoming complicated⁹. It was launched by the AKP government in the first half of this year. The leader of the Kurdish guerrilla forces (PKK) Abdullah Öcalan, who has been imprisoned since 1999, has been involved in this project. Öcalan's message, in which he declared a ceasefire and a gradual withdrawal of militants from Turkey, and above all, set a perspective for a political resolution of the Kurdish issue within the Turkish state, was announced

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to the general public on 21 March. The PKK's field command embarked upon the fulfilment of these promises¹⁰. However, on 5 September, this organisation announced it would halt the withdrawal of militants and accused the government in Ankara of failing to fulfil its obligations under the agreements and of using the ceasefire for its own short-term goals (ensuring itself a good result in local elections in 2014 and strengthening the position of the law enforcement agencies) without intending to really resolve the issue.

⁹ Approximately 10–20% of Turkey's residents. A long history of discrimination and persecution in the republican period; armed struggle in the south-eastern part of the country waged by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) since the 1980s. Outcome: around 30,000 victims and losses of US\$300 billion. After temporary peace at the beginning of the 21st century as a consequence of the detention of the movement's leader, Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK intensified its activity in 2011 (partly due to the new regional circumstances created by the Arab Spring and the civil war in Syria).

¹⁰ According to information from the PKK, around 600 militants were withdrawn from Turkey between May and the end of August.

The PKK's announcement has cast doubt on the future of the peace process and long-term stability in the south-eastern part of the country. The successful completion of this process would bring an end to a long and bloody conflict, would strengthen the country's security and would allow the government regain much of the prestige it has lost. A possible failure (another one after the unsuccessful attempt in 2009) could however ruin the chance that this conflict could be settled in the predictable future.

It is difficult to determine the likelihood of military action being resumed by the PKK. The struggle in Syria to set up a Kurdish autonomy in the north of the country could stop the PKK from re-opening the Turkish front. On the other hand, the approaching election season would be a convenient moment to destabilise the situation in Turkish Kurdistan and to make a display of its force.

Beyond any doubt, the PKK will be putting more and more pressure on the government and strengthening both its political¹¹ and organisational influence (setting up a kind of underground state). Unless this issue is resolved politically, this is likely to merely postpone a confrontation with the Turkish state.

In its attempt to resolve the Kurdish issue the government is trying to satisfy, at least partly, Kurdish expectations, and thus marginalise the PKK: to deprive it of its arguments and thus make it impossible for the PKK to identify itself with the Kurdish minority *per se*. This means it is necessary to navigate between the minority's national aspirations (including the demands regarding culture, language, education and granting more power to local authorities) on the one hand and, on the other hand, between the national sentiments of the Turkish majority and the threat of upsetting the country's uni-

¹¹ The leftist-nationalist PKK (Marxist roots) wants to become the only party representing all Kurds in Turkey and Syria (its political position in Iraq, the military base of this movement, is weak) and has consistently fought other political forces. Examples over the past few weeks in Turkey include attacks on the offices of the Islamic party Hur Dava, which is linked to the Kurdish Hizbullah.

ty. Although the PKK has officially given up its desire to separate Kurdistan from Turkey, the proposal to set up a “democratic autonomy” is making the government concerned that, should the PKK’s demands be fulfilled, independence from Ankara could be obtained step by step by means of *fait accompli*, without the national framework being openly upset. This concern is growing, especially given the fact that the unitary systems in Iraq and Syria have collapsed.

The Democratic Package announced by the government as a milestone in the peace process turned out to be below the expectations of the Kurdish minority and has failed to meet all of their key demands, such as: the right to education in their native language, releasing Kurdish national activists from prisons, the reduction of the 10% electoral threshold, increasing the prerogatives of the local governments, withdrawing support for the groups who fight against Kurds in Syria, and also – a demand which Turkish public opinion find especially difficult to accept – changing the conditions in which Abdullah Öcalan is serving his sentence.

Given this situation, it appears that it will be difficult to break the deadlock in the peace process, especially as the election year is approaching and the ‘siege mentality’ is clearly on the rise in government circles (facing domestic and external problems). However, a possible postponement in the finalisation of the peace process until a time after elections will probably lead to this process failing.

The unadopted constitution: the uncertain future of the AKP elite

Prime Minister Erdoğan also needs to face a number of problems inside his political camp, including the question concerning his own future. The unsuccessful amendment of the constitution which the government wanted to enact between 2011 (parliamentary election) and 2014–2015 (local, presidential and parliamentary elections) has blocked the implementation of the political

strategy which had been designed to be applied in the upcoming electoral season. Pursuant to it, Erdoğan was to be elected president of Turkey in 2014 (in the first general presidential election in the republic’s history and at a time when the country’s political system was to be changed into the presidential system), while a great part of influential figures from the party and the government would take positions in local governments¹².

The AKP is entering the electoral season in the state of uncertainty about the country’s system and the political future of dozens of leading politicians who now form the government elite.

This would have given Recep Tayyip Erdoğan an actual monopoly of power in the party and in the state, and the perspective that he would rule the country for another decade and would lead Turkey through the symbolic date, the year 2023, the republic’s hundredth anniversary. This would have offered the opportunity to draw parallels between him and the founder of the republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

These plans were thwarted. The AKP has no independent constitutional majority, and an open link between the work on a new constitution and Erdoğan’s project to strengthen his power gave rise to resistance among the opposition parties and doubts among the general public¹³. As a consequence, the AKP is entering the ap-

¹² According to the AKP’s internal regulations, its members can hold the same positions in the state administration and party structures for three consecutive government tenures as a maximum. The regulations in the present form will eliminate the vast majority of key politicians from the government and the party after the present parliamentary tenure is over. The adoption of the act in 2012 increasing the number of cities with metropolis status from 16 to 30 since local elections in 2014 was an element of preparing the ground for transferring these officials to positions in local administration.

¹³ 39.8% were against and 35.2% were in favour of the presidential system in April this year, cf. <http://www.metropoll.com.tr/report/turkiyenin-nabzi-yeni-cozum-sureci-nisan-2013>

proaching electoral season in a state of uncertainty about the country's system and the political future of dozens of leading politicians who now form the government elite.

The person who has benefited from the failure of Erdoğan's plans (which were not unilaterally accepted even within the AKP) is the second historic leader of this party, President Abdullah Gül. He, as compared to the autocratic and confrontational Erdoğan, is ever more clearly building his image as a conciliatory politician who is true to the reformative and democratic trends in politics. An open conflict between the two appears unlikely, especially given the much weaker position of the president within the party and the state apparatus. However, Gül's growing popularity (an approval rating of 76.5% as compared to 63% for the prime minister; data from Metropoll, August 2013) is an obstacle for Erdoğan in his desire to take a monopoly of power. The more so, that in the public debate opinions are ever more frequently appearing, that it is the prime minister who is leading the party and the state in the wrong direction due to his personal ambitions and hardline approach, while the political formula of the AKP, which is a conservative-democratic party with Islamic roots and is aimed at democratisation and reforming the state, is still popular and promising. The continuation of this trend in the party could be guaranteed if it was led by Abdullah Gül¹⁴. Furthermore, the president is liked and support-

ed by the remarkably influential religious community, the Fethullah Gülen Movement (Gülen is a Muslim religious leader and scholar, who are at odds with the prime minister.

Conclusion

The 1980s in Turkey was a period strongly affected domestically by the military coup of 1980 and by martial law being in force until 1987, and in foreign terms, by the intensifying feeling of being encircled by the USSR and its clients and satellites on the one hand and by the Islamic Republic of Iran on the other. In turn, the first post-Cold War decade in the 1990s was marked by strong social, political and economic upheaval. Against this background, the period 2002-2013 brought stability, increasing welfare and a strengthening international position to the country. Turkey under the AKP's rule was more and more seen as an emerging regional power, stable, undergoing democratisation, with a young society and a growing economy, radiating with a positive example to all the neighbouring regions plunged in problems: the Balkans, the Southern Caucasus and the Middle East.

At present, for the first time in a decade, the AKP government is encountering major impediments both domestically and internationally, and the party's image has been tarnished due to doubts as to the authenticity of its commitment to the ideals of a liberal secular democracy. This situation is a test for both the government's ambitions and the country's aspirations to become a powerful state.

¹⁴ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/a-future-with-gul.aspx?pageID=449&nID=54626&NewsCatID=411>

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