

Turkey's Moment of Inflection

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Turkey today imagines itself as a major contender on the global scene. It is the world's seventeenth-largest economy and has used its geostrategic position and active diplomacy to assume membership in the UN Security Council for the first time in almost 50 years, to become a member of the G20 and to take on a visible role in international disputes. But it faces daunting obstacles at home and abroad, the two most important being the Kurdish problem and the state of civil–military relations. How the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) handles these two challenges will determine whether the current improvement in the Turkish political economy proves to be fleeting. Turkey is at an inflection moment. If it can resolve these problems it will find that many of the obstacles to European membership and continuing development will rapidly recede. Failure will mean a return to nationalist and autarchic policies as well as continual violence and instability.

The usual third alternative, muddling through, no longer appears to be an option. This has to do with the drivers of the current change. In addition to external forces such as the EU and globalisation, two noteworthy factors are the AKP leadership and an emerging civil society which had, for far too long, been dormant and cowed by the state's hegemonic power. The AKP, which advocates economic liberalism and engendered the current political opening, has two handicaps that militate against an orderly liberal progres-

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sion. The first is its own tendency towards authoritarianism, as indicated by the domination of its own party politics by a single leader. The second is that its political instincts are not liberal in the classical sense, but rather imbued first and foremost by an apprehension for Muslim sensibilities and concerns. Thus while the AKP may be economically liberal, politically and culturally it has yet to transform itself. The burgeoning civil society, moreover, does not automatically translate into increased tolerance: Turkish culture still suffers from xenophobia and mistrust of both minorities and the outside world. This is attributable, in part, to the weakness of institutions such as the media and the education system.

The road to here

The AKP's rise was made possible by reforms instituted by Turgut Özal after the 1980 military coup. He broke with the military junta (which he had served as economic czar) to run for parliament at the head of his own Motherland Party. The junta had already promulgated an authoritarian constitution and selected two 'acceptable' parties to run. Özal's ascension as prime minister in 1983 heralded the economic liberalisation that set the stage for Turkey's current economic success. An unintended consequence of his reforms was the emergence of a new business elite in the Anatolian countryside, far from the traditional industrial strongholds in Istanbul and Izmir. Towns with an export-oriented middle class (conservative and pious, yet willing to engage international markets, export its wares and travel abroad) eventually emerged. The Anatolian Tigers, as these elites came to be known, changed both Turkey's economy and politics. The Tigers were the drivers of a continued opening to the rest of the world, and came to form the backbone of the AKP, which they helped finance and support politically. By helping to curb the power of traditional economic centres, they also gave the AKP room to manoeuvre. The opening they support, however, is based on open markets and engagement abroad with a distinct cultural bias rooted partially in Islam and partially in simple conservative values. A Turkish company, for example, may well have bought Godiva Chocolatiers, but would not be expected to invite the thinly clad Godiva models to Turkey.

The relationship between this new conservative elite and political power is self-reinforcing. The AKP has continued Özal's vigorous pursuit of international commercial relationships for Turkish business. Turkish exports jumped from \$31 billion in 2001 to \$132bn in 2008, the last year before the financial crisis hit. Exports have become the mainstay of the Turkish economy and at all levels of the state the promotion of commercial relations is the first order of business. President Abdullah Gul's April 2010 trip to African countries, such as Cameroon, was purely focused on economic issues and he took some 120 businessmen with him. The party has also aggressively used Turkish airlines to help open markets for Turkish business and established relationships with new countries and regions.

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It created, for example, a Turkey–Africa forum that meets annually, alternating between Ankara and an African capital, along with quasi-independent non-governmental organisations entrusted with deepening relationships. As the AKP wins contracts for its business supporters, they, in turn, reward it by contributing to the party's coffers and elsewhere.

Other mainstream political parties have completely missed the significance of this transformation in Turkey's political economy. Unable to build broad bases of support, they have been reduced to either political naysayers or representing those who yearn for a return to the status quo ante. Parties such as the Republican People's Party (CHP), which seemingly offers a social-democratic alternative to the AKP, have become champions of *immobilisme*. The CHP, often in alliance with elements of the state apparatus, particularly the judiciary, has resisted efforts at reforming different aspects of the state structure. Many of these reforms, ironically, were designed to bring Turkey in line with EU standards, a goal that the party ostensibly supports.

In contrast to the transformation in the political economy, Turkey is flirting with the possibility of deep political paralysis. Every move and every effort is contested, making fundamental reform impossible. The AKP has few allies: a segment of the liberal intellectual elite, the conservative business elites and religious orders. One such order, inspired and named for theologian Fethullah Gülen, is extremely powerful; it controls numerous

media outlets and business organisations and has a devoted and dedicated following. Arrayed against the AKP are the bulk of the state apparatus, an important segment of the press establishment, many academics, the old-line political parties and the judiciary. Caught in the middle, and running scared, are some members of the intellectual elite, and the old Western-oriented business elite represented by the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (TUSIAD), which sympathises with the party's broad goals but not with its leadership or Islamist origins. The last five or six years have also shown that there is no shortage of civilian or military coup plotters.¹

Competing histories

Modern Turkey is first and foremost an ideological state. It was at the outset an amalgam based on a definition of Turkishness that was simultaneously exclusionary and inclusionary, a conception of modernism that was morally vacuous aimed at emulating technologically superior states while ignoring the fabric that held society together during the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. It is understandable that the new state built, in the 1920s and early 1930s, a defensive edifice that denied ethnic differences and suppressed religion in its quest to consolidate. The problem arose after the death of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1938. Ataturk had fashioned the new state in his own image. He was determined to impose his vision and will on a population he perceived to be backward and uninformed. While his reforms and policies were audacious – changing the alphabet, imposing a dress code and breaking decisively with the past – the whole proved smaller than the sum of its parts. Ataturk bequeathed his successors a structure that would prove difficult to manage without his own presence. Hence his successors immortalised him, creating an ideology, Kemalism, as a self-justifying and self-perpetuating concept. Every subsequent change had to be justified by reference to Ataturk and his thinking. By the same token, resistance to change could only succeed by invoking his thinking and precepts. Turkey remained ossified in an ideological cocoon that prevented it from adapting.

Kemalism was used by Ataturk's authoritarian and democratically elected successors to protect the state (or at least their construction of it) from individuals, civil society and alternative visions. A senior general

recently told one prominent academic that, in Turkey, there was no civil society, 'there only is the state, the army and the people'.² The Kemalist elite that ran the country until recently was composed of the civilian and military bureaucracy, the judiciary, academia, the media and state-supported business groups. There was also an effective process of social indoctrination imposed from above. The result was a country of laws but not the rule of law.

It worked, but only for a while. Two long-term factors explain the emergence of cracks in the Kemalist edifice. Firstly, the two main groups subject to repression and indoctrination – the pious and the Kurds – refused to buckle under. Kurds did not assimilate as the Kemalists had envisaged, but resisted, sometimes violently, the negation of their language, heritage and existence as an identifiable group. The religiously inclined found refuge in provincial towns and rural areas and created thriving but low-profile networks. Turkey was, in essence, more than one country: those who bought into the ideology inhabited a make-believe world in which Kurds and pious Muslims did not exist. The ruling elite, however, remained vigilant, purging members of such groups from the military and the bureaucracy, and maintaining a repressive rural police apparatus and a system of internal exile.

The second factor was geopolitical change. The Cold War had provided the ruling elite an additional layer of protection over the cocoon they had constructed. Its end had a shock effect on the Turkish political system. Nationalist stirrings in neighbouring countries, two wars in Iraq, the new saliency of the democracy agenda, the possibility of EU membership and the retreat of the left in all of its forms shook the Kemalist foundations to the core. Although the demise of the Soviet empire opened new vistas for Ankara, it also opened a new can of worms, including the need to confront Turkey's own imperial past.

There were other factors as well, most of them reflecting political errors by the elites. The military, in particular, has engaged in social engineering, interfering in domestic and international politics and imposing its will and preferences on politicians and institutions of all stripes. The officer corps derives the right to interfere from Article 35 of a 1961 law, which states that 'the role of the Armed Forces is to watch over and protect the Turkish home-

land and the Turkish Republic as defined by its Constitution'. In almost every case in which the military has intervened under this article, the justification has been to defend democracy. In the past, politicians have deferred to the military; the military, in turn, has assumed that its role in society and the political system is unassailable. The armed forces have also deceived themselves that opinion polls that show the army 'as the most respected institution in the country'³ translate into a *carte blanche* to intervene in all matters political, economic or social. If, in the past, the military's preferences carried the day, today the officer corps not only encounters greater resistance, especially from the majority AKP, but is paying the price for having alienated other institutions and ordinary citizens through the way it articulated and imposed those preferences.

A recent egregious case of army interference occurred in April 2007, when the chief of staff posted on the Turkish Armed Forces website a clumsily written warning against the selection of Abdullah Gul as president. The army's opposition was primarily, if not exclusively, due to the fact that Gul's wife wore a headscarf, which it found an unacceptable religious expression for the spouse of someone who would occupy a position once held by Ataturk. As in a number of previous instances where the military overreached, the 2007 ultimatum backfired. The government, caught between opposition from the judiciary and CHP on the one hand and the military on the other, called for early elections. The AKP received 47% of the vote (compared to 34% in the previous election), the first time since 1954 an incumbent party had increased its vote share. Following this resounding victory, Gul was elected president.

The election result was a humiliating defeat for the military, which had been accustomed to always getting its way and to a degree of unaccountability. In 1997, in what would later be dubbed a 'postmodern' coup, it had forced a coalition government out of office precisely because the senior coalition partner was an Islamist party (of which many of the current AKP leaders were members). The postmodern coup did not require tanks to roll up to critical locations in Ankara and Istanbul. It started with a list of demands delivered to the government at a National Security Council meeting, followed by the mobilisation of the press, academia, judiciary and

some civil-society groups through public briefings by senior officers at the headquarters of the chief of the General Staff. But when the military tried it again in 2007, through large-scale 'Republic demonstrations' in a number of cities, the AKP did not cower or budge.

The attempt to derail Gul's candidacy coincided with allegations of myriad coup plans by senior officers, the army's mismanagement of the war with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and cover-ups of gross negligence resulting in the deaths of soldiers. The resulting loss of prestige for the military has been costly: officers have been arrested on suspicion of plotting a coup and the chief of the General Staff has increasingly found himself on the defensive. In an atmosphere of increased politicisation, polarisation and stalemate it remains to be seen whether the military can accept its diminished role quietly.

The moment of inflection

Turkey has increased its capacity to reform and modernise. Choices made by the traditional Turkish elite, especially the decision to push for EU membership, have hastened the pace of reform and capacity formation. The EU benchmarks for candidate countries have, paradoxically, increased the relative power of previously weak political actors at the expense of the former elites.

Turkey is now far more transparent and prosperous and its government more capable than ever before. The institutions that are decaying are precisely those that have been roadblocks to change, although they have not disappeared and still pack considerable punch. What differentiates Turkey from other rising middle-income countries such as Brazil, Indonesia or South Africa is the overarching framework of Kemalist ideology. This acts as a *raison d'être* for the continued influence and resistance of the old guard. Those who would like to transform the country's ideological underpinning are not sufficiently strong to reinterpret Kemalist principles to create a basis for normal politics. Kemalism is the construct of a self-perpetuating (though diminishing) group which has claimed a monopoly on its interpretation.

Another difference between Turkey and other middle-income countries is its imperial legacy. The Ottoman Empire ceased to exist some 90

years ago, but modern Turkey has an ambivalent relationship with its past. Not surprisingly, Turks have highlighted what they think are the glorious aspects and conveniently overlooked the distasteful moments of their imperial past. But the remnants of that past are a heavy burden that has yet to be dealt with. Many of these involve disputes with other countries or minority rights. One manifestation of the imperial legacy can be seen in the high levels of xenophobia and resentment of the very institutions and countries with which Turkey has aspired to associate and align for decades. Attitudes towards ethnic or religious minorities have hardened with time.

The AKP deserves credit for pushing the boundaries of an archaic system that has proven hesitant in handling change. But the party might not be the best agent to see through the changes it has initiated. It may even provoke a backlash.

The European order Turkey has been trying to join is built on a set of liberal, market-oriented, democratic and politically open ideals. The

Attitudes towards minorities have hardened

AKP lives up to one of these: it is market-oriented and has made the opening of trade opportunities at home and abroad a priority. It has none of the autarchic tendencies that have crippled past Turkish administrations. It has shown that it is willing to enter commercial and financial deals with anyone, provided the price is right. Nor has

it shied from privatising state assets. On the other hand, it has done little to curb corruption; only the beneficiaries of corruption have changed, and the amount changing hands is much larger in an economy that has grown rapidly.

The AKP is not a classical liberal party. While it wants to curb the excessive power of the military, judiciary and media, this is to protect itself and its supporters. It has not shied away from tactics and strategies that are undemocratic and similar to those of its opposition. Instead of transforming the corrupt media sector through constitutional channels, for example, the AKP sought to destroy its opponents and replace them with pliant allies. Moreover, despite a healthy beginning, the party has lost much of its own internal democracy and has become the tool of the party leader. Prime

Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has, in the end, emulated the traditional Turkish pattern in which one man dominates every aspect of a particular party. Internal dissent is not tolerated and is non-existent.

Although the AKP has failed to articulate a liberal philosophy, it has won social-democratic votes by delivering better economic performance at the local level and paying attention to working-class concerns. It is organised in every district and sub-district of the country and keeps tabs on the population's immediate needs. Despite its conservative character, the AKP successfully straddles the left-right economic divide. Barring unexpected events or a major mistake, it is likely to remain in power for the foreseeable future.

To complete the changes it has started, the AKP has to formulate a liberal vision, to include cultural tolerance and complete political freedom and respect for individual rights in addition to the market liberalism it already espouses. This is necessary both as an alternative to rigid Kemalism and to win over groups caught between the Kemalist state and the party. Such groups can ultimately provide the legitimacy needed to draft, discuss and adopt a new constitution to replace the one imposed by the military in 1982. The more liberal elements of society, ready for the Kemalist state to be reformed but wary of the AKP, thus constitute the critical swing vote. The AKP has not inspired confidence in large measure because it has not conveyed the message that it is ready to implement reforms for the benefit of all segments of Turkish society, not just its conservative and religious backers. It has repeatedly signalled that it cares more about the rights of observant Muslims than any other group. For example, after its convincing victory in 2007, instead of using its political capital to start a conversation on a new constitution, the AKP preferred just to amend the constitution to remove the ban on women with headscarves from attending university. Although this is an injustice imposed on one select group in society, it could have nevertheless been included in a new draft constitution that addressed the many other anomalies of the Turkish judicial and political system. The AKP, though aware of the sensitivities of the secular elites to any attempted interference on alcohol consumption, has also refused to publicly assuage their fears or prevent local municipalities from single-handedly implement-

ing such bans. It has almost never stood up for liberal values against the preferences of its base. It had an opportunity to push for a new constitution but could not bring itself to take it.

When it has initiated bold proposals, as with the case of the current Kurdish initiative, the AKP has lacked conviction primarily because it has been incapable of formulating a liberal rationalisation and has instead offered instrumentalist rationales open to compromise or even abandonment. The initiative – later renamed the Democratic Initiative – is an attempt at introducing reforms that would facilitate the end of the PKK-led insurgency and ultimately lead to that organisation's demilitarisation and return of many of its fighters back to society. The AKP's plan, though quite general in nature, is composed of a series of cultural and political measures, including the relaxation on the use the Kurdish language and democratising the political apparatus so as to treat Kurds as equal citizens. Although not formally part of the plan, the AKP has, in a change from past practice, embraced the Kurdish Regional Government of northern Iraq in an attempt to curry favour with Turkey's Kurdish citizens. But when such difficult and complex initiatives encounter predictable setbacks and opposition, the AKP has, like other Turkish parties, tended to retreat behind reflexive nationalist positions.

Perhaps only a party influenced by pious Muslims could have begun the process of transformation, but to complete it the AKP needs to transform itself into a centre-right party based on liberal values, not unlike the European Christian Democrats. There is still time, but if it fails to do so it may trigger a backlash from conservative and statist elements that will pounce on any error it might commit. One important deadline could be the expected change in the military high command in August 2010, which may lead to a more assertive and combative leadership.

The Turkish military also has a choice to make. It can either transition into a traditional military establishment, thereby abandoning its position as the ultimate arbiter of what Turkey should look like and relinquishing some of the prerogatives (such as immunity from civilian oversight) it has asserted over the years, or it can resist. Resistance will precipitate instability or even a coup, although most analysts seem to think that the age of coups

is over. Another attempt to restructure the political environment by banning the AKP, as occurred in 2008, also remains a possibility.

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The next elections in Turkey are likely to be in July 2011. The country, certainly the AKP, is already in election mode. The government has backed away from the Kurdish initiative because it estimates it has cost it votes in traditional Turkish areas of the country without winning new ones in the Kurdish regions. Even in foreign policy, its much-heralded opening on Armenia is on hold for similar reasons. Instead, the government chose to push through selective amendments to the constitution in the hope of demonstrating it has forward momentum. Irrespective of the outcome of these amendments (some, such as the critical one aimed at preventing the banning of political parties, failed) the fact of the matter is that the period since the July 2007 elections is likely to be seen as lost years.

Europe, increasingly distracted by its own problems, is unlikely to provide the kind of support for Turkey's domestic reforms it has in the past. Even though a discredited Turkish opposition has meant that there are no alternatives to the AKP, Europeans have either turned their backs on Turkey or are disappointed with the AKP government. It had promised, and initially delivered, a great deal but now appears to have lost its bearings. It has, for instance, been extremely timid on expanding free speech, making changes that have had little or no impact.

In the absence of a strong European push or pull, the AKP will increasingly find it hard to move forward with its agenda. Its current retreat on the Kurdish opening does not bode well, as having raised expectations it confronts a wave of disappointment and anger. The Kurdish issue is by far the most explosive problem confronting Turkey, and Kurdish demands are not abating. On the contrary, there is greater mobilisation among the youth and a corresponding greater potential for violence and counter-violence.

The AKP has to chart a path for the future. Its surest way is to promise a brand new constitution to replace the one imposed by the military in 1982. However, this new constitution has to be the product of an open, trans-

parent, consultative and inclusive process. It has to be liberal in intent and content and aim at being the last constitution Turkey will need for a long time. This is unlikely to be easy.

Notes

- ¹ Over the course of the last few years, the Turkish press has expounded on a variety of coup plots hatched by retired and active-duty officers as well as their sympathisers in civil society. Some of these revelations have come about as a result of leaks from within the armed forces or state bureaucracy. Prosecutors investigating a series of violent events, such as bombings and murders, unearthed others. Dubbed the Ergenekon conspiracy by the media, in reality, these attempts at either creating conditions for a coup or implementing a coup were the brainchild of different groups, many of which were unaware of the existence of other conspirators. The most important of these revelations concern those of acting service chiefs in 2004, some of whom went on with their conspiratorial endeavours after retiring from the military. Although their efforts proved futile, the revelations have dealt the armed forces a serious blow to their prestige. Many retired officers, including three- and four-star generals, as well as active-duty officers have been arrested and imprisoned pending the investigation. This, in and of itself, is unheard of in Turkey where the military has enjoyed an unaccountable status in society.
- ² Personal communication, March 2010.
- ³ Delphine Strauss, 'At the Garrison's Gate', *Financial Times*, 3 March 2010.