

## From the Desk of the Editor

This issue of Turkish Policy Quarterly (TPQ) focuses on the democratic challenges Turkey faces on a wide range of policy issues, from the Kurdish peace process to the governance of the Internet, and from social policies to the implementation of rights for the disabled. As the general elections scheduled for June 2015 draw near, we also take up highly topical dimensions such as party financing, election monitoring, and the dynamics of political activism in various segments of society. Our authors assess the country's tense political polarization, which is reflected in every sphere – from social media to public squares. As always, we tread a constructive line, stimulating critical debate, and providing perspectives from not only politicians from different parties, but also academics, entrepreneurs, practitioners, and grassroots activists with differing convictions.

The EU has been a driving force in Turkey's democratic evolution, as a setter of governance benchmarks, an incentive for political reform, and a source of inspiration and capacity-building support for Turkey's civil society. In recent years, concern in European capitals about the regression of rule of law in Turkey has spiked, leading to divergences within the EU as to whether this calls for derailing or for rejuvenating the accession process. Though the assessment that Turkey does not comply with basic EU political criteria in areas such as judiciary independence and freedom of expression has gained ground, the EU has little leverage over Ankara to foster positive change in the absence of a viable prospect of membership.

In this issue, Ambassador Volkan Bozkır, Minister for EU Affairs and Chief Negotiator of Turkey, points to the new decision-making teams that came to leadership positions in Ankara and Brussels in the second half of 2014 as an opportunity to improve Turkey-EU relations. He emphasizes the positive socio-economic and political transformation Turkey has undergone in the past 12 years, and presents highlights of Turkey's New EU Strategy, announced last September. Arguing that it is in the interests of both Turkey and the EU to reinvigorate the accession process, Bozkır underlines the rising importance of cooperation on regional matters – from border management to energy security. He concludes that a vision for the EU in line with its own global aspirations has to factor into Turkey's accession.

Kurdish rights have consistently been a key issue on the EU's democratization agenda for Turkey. This is one area in which positive change has been marked in

recent years – including expanded cultural rights in the use of the Kurdish language, efforts to strengthen social integration, and a more open public debate. However, concrete progress in resolving the conflict that has spanned three decades has been limited and is arguably the most pressing challenge Turkey faces today, particular given its far reaching regional and domestic political implications.

Selahattin Demirtaş, Co-Chairman of the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), explains that the Kurdish Problem is a central component of Turkey’s democratization. Demirtaş expresses encouragement about a new awareness that has emerged, with large segments of society “seeking answers to what the Kurdish Problem is, what the Kurds demand, and who the Kurds are for the first time.” However, he is critical of the lack of transparency in the talks between the PKK and Ankara, and points out that very little concrete progress in terms of democracy and freedom has been made to date. He also expresses concern about the new internal security laws put forward by the government, which he believes will create the conditions of a police state. Touching briefly on foreign policy, Demirtaş characterizes the AKP’s Middle East policy using the words “failure,” “fantasy,” and “greed.”

Demirtaş, who ran as a candidate in the 2014 presidential election, explains his party’s vision for the country: a participatory and direct democracy where local, civic assemblies supervise the Parliament and defend their rights – i.e. democratic autonomy and radical democracy. He also emphasizes that the HDP’s success fosters progressive transformation in the Middle East.

The decision announced by the HDP to run in the upcoming elections as a party rather than by nominating independent candidates means that the party needs to pass the electoral threshold of 10 percent in order to be represented in Parliament. Whether or not the HDP is represented will affect not only prospects for the peace process but also the likelihood of the AKP being able to pass a new constitution, and transform Turkey’s parliamentary system into a presidential one. In the months ahead, all eyes will accordingly be fixed on how the HDP is faring in terms of appealing to voters beyond its traditional Kurdish base.

Drawing attention to the regional and international power dynamics tied up in the Kurdish peace process, University of Nottingham Doctoral Researcher Egemen Bezci focuses on the divergence of opinion between Kurdish representatives and Ankara over the presence of a “third eye” in the talks, i.e. international

monitoring. He analyzes the accomplishments and difficulties faced in the series of meetings between government officials and PKK cadres that began in 2005, broke off in 2011, and recommenced in 2012. He elaborates on the rising call from the PKK to internationalize the peace talks, and Ankara's resistance to it. Bezci suggests there are dynamics at play that may lead Turkey to loose ground, such as changing power balances in Iraq and Syria, frictions between Turkey and its Western allies, and the strengthening of Western strategic ties with Kurdish parties in the region due to the successful Kurdish campaigns against ISIL.

Particularly in the last few years, the AKP government's implementation of urban transformation projects that have altered the landscape of cities across Turkey has been met with increasing controversy. Gürsel Tekin, Vice-President of the Republican People's Party (CHP), elaborates on the procedural problems in and negative impact of AKP's urban transformation policies on lower income households. He attributes the transfer of authority relating to urban development from municipalities to central government bodies to the drive to expand central control, and questions fairness of tender processes. Tekin particularly focuses on the 2012 Draft Law on the Regeneration of Areas under Disaster Risk, which would empower the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization to appropriate all property it deems "risky," and build new structures in their place. According to Tekin, this law will enable the government to impose its will on urban spaces without accountability, transparency, or popular consent. Finally, Tekin lays out his party's vision of "urban renewal" – a citizens-based approach that respects housing needs, the environment, and cultural heritage.

In Turkey's increasingly polarized climate, another area of contestation has emerged in the form of diametrically opposed narratives with regard to the country's democratic evolution. On the one hand, the AKP government's propaganda seeks to frame recent political history in a way to brand itself as the ultimate democratizer. On the other hand, the AKP has faced virulent counter-narratives depicting the party as a threat to the basic tenets of the Republic – the beginning of the end of secular and pluralistic democracy.

As case in point, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has claimed the closure of a parenthesis in Turkey's democracy that opened with the 1960 military coup by handing sovereignty back to the people. In likening himself to Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, who was toppled in the 1960 coup, Erdoğan has consistently "romanticized" the Menderes era, according to Georgetown University PhD

candidate Nick Danforth. He explains that while the rule of Menderes was indeed legitimized by popular support and brought about a relative degree of democracy, it was also ridden with corruption and authoritarianism. Danforth recognizes the post-Menderes trauma of military rule and the authoritarian nationalism it promoted, as well as the justified insecurity – bordering on paranoia – that this legacy has generated among AKP’s leaders. However, he also suggests that, like Menderes who took a dictatorial turn while in power, President Erdoğan has instituted civilian authoritarianism rather than liberal democracy.

Rather than trying to understand the legitimate grievances of people who adopt adversarial positions toward the government, those in power have attributed criticism to conspiracies by foreign powers, responding with even more polarizing and intimidating rhetoric, as well as repressive measures. Sezen Yalçın refers to this downward spiral as an “undercover war against civil society and grassroots organizing.” There have been many different battlefields in this standoff, elaborated on in this issue of TPQ.

Since the AKP began consolidating its powers in 2007, political space for critical civil society has been shrinking, according to Yalçın, Field Coordinator for the Association for Social Policies, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation Studies (SPoD). She describes how fear of organized action is being fomented in society by restrictions on the right to demonstrate, discourse that de-legitimizes dissent, and new laws that expand the power of law enforcement agencies to conduct arbitrary arrests, wire-tapping, and searches. However, Yalçın also insightfully reveals a silver lining to the travails of Turkey’s opposition. She notes that, through the shared experiences of struggle during the *Gezi* Park protests in 2013, a sense of solidarity developed among segments of society that were not previously linked and may not have otherwise found common ground.

The securitized approach to the expression of dissent in public spaces is also reflected in the government’s tightening control over the Internet. Ebru İlhan, who works for an international group of companies on issues of sustainability, elaborates on how the battle over politics and culture/ideology between the AKP leadership and its supporters and “a nebulous mass of politically aligned or non-aligned groups” is reflected in the digital arena. İlhan outlines how the mechanisms introduced to govern new media in Turkey limit free use of the Internet. For example, in addition to the restriction of access to tens of thousands

of domains, extensive public surveillance of online activity has been made possible with a new Internet law ratified in September 2014. However, she also notes positive steps in this area, such as the expansion of e-government services.

İlhan provides a number of statistics revealing the swell of Turkey's entertainment and media industry, Internet users, social media subscribers, and digital advertising figures. Given the leverage the government is able to employ over conventional media, she explains that the Internet functions as a space of dynamic alternative news and opinion, one that is least overpowered by government influence. She also gives an overview of how the AKP configures its social media strategy as an offensive against its "digital enemies." İlhan points out that Turkey's businesses have high stakes in the healthy expansion of the country's new media sector, because Turkey's deeper engagement in the Internet economy is necessary for the country to realize its growth potential.

Also focusing on the Internet as an arena of political contestation, Ahu Yiğit, a specialist in Turkish politics based in Washington DC, presents a lively account of the online humor and satire in criticism that boomed during the *Gezi* Park protests in Turkey, particularly among the youth. Noting that participation in this online community of Internet activism has not translated into party politics, she points out that it remains mobilized as a new form of public debate. Referring to examples in Egypt and the US, Yiğit points out that this is not a phenomenon exclusive to Turkey. Illuminating the profile and outlook of online satirists, Yiğit draws parallels between them and the *Gezi* protesters, in that most do not support any particular political party, and do not actively pursue a political agenda. Securitizing this creative entertainment is thus misplaced, argues Yiğit, and only deepens the distrust of conventional politics among young people who have bonded together around humor as an avenue of expression.

Another angle of the *Gezi* resistance taken up in this issue of TPQ is its effect on civic engagement among Turkey's youth. As elaborated on by Sercan Çelebi from the perspective of an NGO focusing on elections, talented young people steered clear of politics for decades. However, *Oy ve Ötesi*, of which Çelebi is Co-Founder and Chairman, has tapped into a dormant need to participate in this arena. He provides an overview of this grassroots movement's activities to boost voter turnout, create a sense of accountability of candidates towards voters, and deploy monitoring missions of volunteers for the two elections in 2014. While significant fraud was not witnessed, Çelebi argues that their oversight enhanced

the transparency and credibility of the elections. Moreover, Çelebi predicts that the skills, knowledge, and motivation developed through election-monitoring activities will have a snowball effect on civic participation in other areas.

Much of the vulnerability among social segments not aligned with the AKP, increasingly expressed through civil society movements stems from the lack of adequate checks and balances in the political system, the consistently undermined independence of the judiciary, and the lack of a fair playing field for opposition parties. It is within this framework that Seda Kırdar, an analyst for the Checks and Balances Network, takes up the issue of party financing. The quality of a democracy is very much determined by how parties generate revenue and spend money, and whether party accounts are effectively audited, she states. While noting positive steps that have been taken – such as the reduction of the threshold necessary in order to receive direct public funding from 7 percent of the national vote to 3 percent – she argues that much more comprehensive reform is needed. As Kırdar stresses, Turkey’s system of political party financing lacks transparency, leaving citizens unable to hold political parties accountable to playing by the rules. She also emphasizes the 10 percent threshold in Turkey’s general elections makes it almost impossible for smaller political parties to function and survive.

Another issue that has captivated domestic attention and sparked fierce debate is whether equality between men and women is an objective toward which the country should be striving. Sare Aydın Yılmaz, faculty member at Istanbul Commerce University and founding President of the Women and Democracy Association (KADEM), provides a conceptual framework for a view that has been voiced numerous times by President Erdoğan, explaining that judicial and legal equality do not fully eliminate the oppression of women in public life, and arguing that classical feminist approaches advocating equality between men and women neglect the differences between the two sexes. She holds that, rather than trying to masculinize women with an equality-based approach, it is important that female identity and its variations across cultures be recognized, and that “gender justice” be striven for. In arguing in favor of embracing the notion that men and women are “complementary” – i.e. having different functions and duties in social life – Aydın Yılmaz also draws on Islamic doctrine. She points out that the value of women and men is “equivalent” and absent of any hierarchy, but that there is an order in which both need to have privileges that accompany their respective burdens.

As a platform for open debate, we at TPQ consistently cover gender rights in our journal as well as in roundtable discussions. This coming spring we will foster further debate on the “gender equality” versus “gender justice” concept at an event we are organizing in Van, an eastern province of Turkey. We look forward to a lively exchange of perspectives with representatives from the liberal feminist camp as well as conservative and local voices.

Providing an overview of Turkey’s social policy, freelance consultant Emre Üçkardeşler points out that the country’s disadvantaged population is insufficiently supported. Turkey has the third-highest level of income inequality and the third-highest level of relative poverty of all OECD countries. While Turkey has expanded public healthcare coverage and increased public social spending, public social spending is still very low in comparison to other OECD countries. He argues that a more equitable distribution of social spending and greater investment in affordable quality childcare, compulsory early childhood education, and school-to-work transitions are needed.

Mehmet Evsen, an Access Consultant at Destek Accessible Technology Solutions in the UK, elaborates on another dimension of inclusiveness in society: the integration of disabled people into the physical and digital world. While nearly 13 percent of Turkey’s population is disabled, there is little policy debate about accessibility or equality of opportunities for the disabled community. Using concrete examples, Evsen points out that although there have been legislative improvements over the last year, implementation needs to be more effective. As he notes, this is not only an issue policymakers should be concerned about in terms of eliminating discrimination; from a market perspective, the public and private sectors need to more effectively tap into the skillsets of disabled people as employees, and appeal to them as consumers. He explains how advances in technology are making it much easier and more affordable for people with disabilities to shop, obtain information, and provide services.

An important topical debate with regard to rights and freedoms in Turkey is the status of non-Muslims. Anna Maria Beylunioğlu, a PhD candidate at the Department of Social and Political Sciences of the European University Institute in Florence, takes up this topic from the perspective of the relationship between secularism and freedom of religion. She notes that the AKP government’s approach to non-Muslims has been better when compared to those of previous governments. The reason, she suggests, is twofold: EU conditionality and domestic factors, including the AKP constituencies’ past suffering from the suppression

of religious identity in the Republican era. However, she argues that in recent years the AKP's concept of the nation-state is increasingly defined by Islamic values, and the discourse is geared at *respect* for other religions, rather than being embedded within a framework of human rights and equality notions. Beylunioğlu argues that this is why there has been limited progress in establishing a legal framework recognizing and protecting non-Muslim minorities against discrimination.

A related topic that is similarly intertwined with the freedom to challenge previous taboos of state ideology and advocate more inclusive definitions of citizenship is Turkish-Armenian relations. In a joint article, Fiona Hill, Kemal Kirişci, and Andrew Moffatt, all from the Brookings Institution's Center on the United States and Europe (CUSE), reflect on the increasing questioning of official narratives regarding the troubled past of Turks and Armenians in Turkey's society. The relationship between Armenia and Turkey, plagued by clashing historical narratives regarding events of the early 20th century, constitutes both a geostrategic and a democratic challenge for Turkey. Marking the centennial of the massacres and deportations of Armenians from Anatolia, 2015 brings both heightened tension and opportunities for reconciliation. Hill, Kirişci, and Moffatt contend that while a breakthrough in state-to-state relations is not expected this year, a process of reconsidering identity and history, and recognizing Armenian collective memories is gaining ground within Turkey. There have also been noteworthy steps taken in the form of the restoration of Armenian churches in Turkey and the return of Armenian properties that had been confiscated by the state. The commemoration of the anniversary of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink's assassination in January once again brought to the fore discussions related to the judicial system, impunity of political violence, inter-communal relations, and freedom of expression in Turkey.

The horrific attacks on the Paris offices of Charlie Hebdo, a French satirical publication targeted for supposedly insulting Islam, have focused the world's attention on struggles to protect freedom of expression. As TPQ, we remain deeply concerned about convictions made on the basis of inciting hatred or insulting Islam, particularly while impunity exists for those who insult journalists and incite hatred towards other social groups, and censorship of those critical of the government continues in the hands of media owners.

As a policy journal born out of a movement dedicated to the cause of participatory democracy and empowering the youth, and headquartered in a country with 15 million young citizens, in this issue of TPQ we are particularly happy to have had the opportunity to give a voice to perspectives of young people who are involved in grassroots organizing towards building the foundations of a pluralistic democracy.

We are grateful to the Consulate General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands for their support of this issue of TPQ. This issue of TPQ is part of a larger project – entitled *The State of Democracy in Turkey* – which also includes events in universities in Istanbul and Van to foster further discussion on two of the topics taken up here – social media freedoms and women’s rights.

As has become customary, with this issue of TPQ we have made some changes to our advisory board. We are delighted to welcome Kadri Gürsel, a seasoned journalist, who is currently a columnist with *Milliyet* daily and *Al-Monitor*’s Turkey Pulse. As they exit the advisory board, we would like to thank Morton Abramowitz and Mark Parris for honoring us as board members since TPQ’s founding in 2002.

We would like to extend special thanks to the premium corporate sponsor of this issue of TPQ – BP Turkey. In addition to the continuing support of Akenergy, Akbank, AvivaSA, Beko, Citroën, Esen Yacht, Finansbank, Genel Energy, Odea Bank, STFA, TEB, and Turcas Petrol, we are also delighted to welcome Borusan Otomotiv/BMW among our corporate sponsors. As always, we appreciate the outreach provided by our media partner *Hürriyet Daily News* and the long-standing, generous support of Kadir Has University.

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