

BENCHMARKING THE NEW GOVERNMENT

The most remarkable feature of the November elections was the decisive victory of the AKP, a party associated with Islamist politics. The second distinguishing feature was the restoration of a bipolar political system, in other words the emergence of a “center”, that put an end to the series of coalition governments which had ruled since the early 1990s. Despite this political advantage, AKP’s answers to the challenges facing the country are still unclear. The priority of Turkish citizens is the effective restoration of the economy. At another level, two factors which significantly influence more than two centuries of Ottoman-Turkish modernization, namely the role of religion in Turkish social life and relations with the West will constitute the real benchmarks of AKP’s performance in government.

Kaan Durukan¹

¹ **University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of History & Istanbul Technical University Department of Humanities and Social Sciences.**

On 3 November 2002, many members of Turkish society, qualified constituents of the electoral body, went to the polls to vote in general elections to determine who would lead the next government. At first glance, this might seem to be a relatively innocuous local phenomenon, related to a large extent to the internal politics of a specific country; however, factors like the Turkey's candidacy for membership in the E.U., Turkey's (re)definition as a model country, which successfully combines Western values with its Islamic identity, especially in the post-9/11 atmosphere, its historical/political/cultural ties to critical regions of the world such as the Middle East, Central Asia, Balkans and the Caucasus gave these elections an international character and attracted the attention of Washington, Brussels and capitals throughout the above-mentioned geographies, thereby underscoring the importance of the decision the Turkish people would be making. In fact, the publication of numerous articles on Turkey in recent months in some of the most prestigious representatives of Western media, as well as in the press of neighboring nations is solid proof of this vivid interest.

The most remarkable feature of the November elections was, as noted by many, the decisive victory of the AKP, a party associated with Islamist politics and organized under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, ex-mayor of Istanbul, a politician who had been banned by the court from political activity. AKP's lead in the election, followed by the Republican People's Party (CHP), was a widely expected, but very few students of Turkish politics, including the present author, were able to foresee the restoration of a bipolar political system, in other words the emergence of a "center", that put an end to the

series of coalition governments which had ruled since the early 1990s. However, almost no one was able to forecast, even in approximate terms, just how overwhelming AKP's electoral victory was to be. Due in part to the misleading perception of the whole Muslim world as a monolithic, homogeneous entity (the most recent examples were given by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Pope Jean Paul II), many observers, particularly in the Western hemisphere and to a lesser degree, in Turkey, underscored the religious affiliations of the party and were prone to make comparisons with the historical experiences of other Islamic countries like Iran, Algeria, Sudan, etc. However, one should note that the real situation is quite complex, with a number of frequently overlooked albeit crucial nuances. Indeed, the leading figures of AKP objected fiercely to the "Islamist" label they were branded with and stated that they had been inspired by the Christian Democrats of continental Europe in their goal of creating a Muslim Democrat identity, which does not intend to challenge the conceptual framework of Western democracies or the basic premises of the Turkish Republic. Obviously, the task defined here is an extremely difficult one: on the one hand, it must be evident to the Turkish public that they are sincere in these claims and this can only be substantiated by the actions of the new government. Nothing less will convince secular Turkish citizens and especially the military, a key player in Turkey's politics; on the other, though not explicitly, European and American political élites seriously question the sincerity of AKP, but considering the odyssey of the Ottoman-Turkish modernization in the last two centuries, it is perhaps fair to see this approach as an opportunity, which can pave the way for a radically new understanding of Islam. Presently, the moderate language in national politics, the positive attitude towards the U.S., E.U. and other key international

institutions like IMF, rapprochement with Greece and the formation of a Cabinet, which does not include very controversial figures can be seen to indicate a new perspective, yet once again, it is certain that the process will require much more effort and also, as was the case with the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) after the 1999 elections, the equilibrium between the wishes of the party leadership and the expectations of the masses, who voted for AKP is subject to discussion.

The second distinctive characteristic of the elections was the decline of the tripartite coalition: in 1999, the total electoral support for the Democratic Leftist Party (DSP), MHP and the Motherland Party was 53.3%, whereas in 2002, it fell drastically to less than 15%. Even more dramatic was the fact that, ex-Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit's party, a doyen of Turkish politics, gained only 1.2% of the vote. However, this was not only a defeat for the 57th government of the Republic. Despite the declared support of ex-President Süleyman Demirel, True Path Party of Tansu Çiller, one of the main opposition parties in the Parliament and the Felicity Party, strictly controlled by Necmettin Erbakan, a major figure of Islamist politics in Turkey for almost 35 years were unable to obtain even 10 percent – the national electoral threshold. In other words, the results clearly demonstrated the outrage of the Turkish electorate who in a single fell swoop eliminated the "*ancien régime*", and all of its components. However, there is another important point overlooked by many of the political analysts. Contrary to popular belief, Turkey has a relatively long history of democracy, with roots going back to the end of the nineteenth century. For this reason voting is considered an important duty of every citizen; however, in spite of this history, participation in this election was surprisingly low. Approximately 8.5 million people out of 41 million did not go to the

polls; another 1.3 million votes (of course, due to various reasons, but surely protest was one of these) were invalid. This means that almost 25% of the eligible electorate did not vote. Any student of Turkish politics should take note of the reaction of this tremendous section of the electorate, who were frustrated by the policies of the existing government, yet seeing no realistic hope in the creation of a new one, openly refused to take part in the electoral process. A close examination of the nature of these silent masses, its composition and its inner dynamics might be of crucial importance in understanding the future of politics in Turkey.

The third point of interest, which was used throughout the campaign and still dominates the political agenda of Turkey, was/is the emphasis put on the notion of “being new”. In light of the election results, one might correctly claim that this strategic choice worked quite effectively: despite the fact that almost 45% of the Turkish electorate remain unrepresented in the ranks of the National Assembly, CHP and especially AKP gained 55% of the vote and are strongly represented in the Parliament. (New Turkey Party -YTP, founded by ex-Minister of Foreign Affairs İsmail Cem, was another basic propagator of this discourse, as can be deduced from the party’s name ; however, this very young political organization was only able to get 1.1% of the vote.) Ironically, neither CHP nor AKP (nor even YTP) were totally new: indeed, CHP was the founding party of the Republic and always proudly celebrates the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the legendary figure associated with the radical modernization of the country. On the other hand, most of the AKP’s cadres, particularly the leading circles were members of the last two embodiments of the Islamist “National View”, Welfare Party and Virtue Party, respectively. However, both of these parties state that presently, they are in

the process of redefining their positions and preparing *new* models for addressing the various problems Turkey faces. It should also be emphasized that CHP does not reject its historical heritage whereas AKP, as mentioned earlier, represents a serious break, at least in the speeches of its leadership, from the “National View” tradition, a politicized form of Islam formed under different party names since the late 1960s.

No doubt, this discourse based on novel approaches seems highly promising, but the essential point is that none of these parties have produced (or even announced) a substantial program yet. Nowadays, the main priority of Turkish citizens is the effective restructuring of the economy, devastated by two successive crises, which gave rise to a serious rise in unemployment and a drastic decrease in the real national income. There is a general tendency, seen in both parties, to rely upon U.S. and E.U. funds, along with the IMF-inspired program, but how they plan activate the internal dynamics of the economy are still unclear. At another level, two factors, which significantly influence more than two centuries of Ottoman-Turkish modernization, namely the role of religion in Turkish social life and relations with the West (read mainly Europe/E.U. and U.S.) are not discussed in depth. Instead of an evaluation of religion as a sociological phenomenon, visibly shaping Turkish cultural, political and social life, the problem is to a great extent simplified around the veiling issue. In a similar manner, ideas regarding the main axes of Turkish foreign policy, basically the entrance of Turkey into E.U. (together with the fate of Cyprus), the peculiar position before the U.S. (i.e. situation in Iraq), the future of relations with the neighboring critical geographies (the Middle East, Central Asia, the Balkans) are not laid out in detail. The problem of central importance in southeastern Anatolia, affecting the Kurdish populace of the region, as well as the rest of the country,

in terms of enormous human suffering and economic losses, is apparently being viewed solely through the lens of EU policies. Equally, a reinterpretation of Kemalism in light of scientific investigation and scholarly expertise, the founding ideology, or more properly *Weltanschauung* symbolized by six arrows, each denoting a fundamental principle of the Republic, is still remarkably lacking.

To conclude, given the present situation in Turkey, which requires a number of extremely serious decisions in diverse areas such as the economy, local politics and international relations to be made, it can be said that both AKP and CHP, surely in differing degrees, are facing a colossal challenge. However, the weight of this mission should ideally be shared by various segments of the society, including other parties currently not represented in the Parliament, sectors of the state apparatus like the bureaucracy and the army, NGOs and the general public. If the system works in a relative harmony with the contributions of all these components, Turkey (not only the AKP administration!) can be a national success, which would have major international implications. Yet, if unfortunately this does not happen, the developments, which will shape the future of the country are hardly foreseeable even to the leading experts of the field.

In the previous paragraph, the challenges facing Turkey at the turn of the twenty-first century were defined broadly as in the fields of economy, local politics and international relations. First of all, considering the developments in the first months of 2003, one should note that the main phenomenon setting the agenda in all these seemingly unrelated fields was and still is the American military presence in the Middle

East, which for the moment threatens the régime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. However, there are indications that the scope of this enterprise may not be limited to a single country. The political structures of many Middle Eastern, predominantly Arab countries, not necessarily the archenemies of the U.S., but even those who are close allies, may be significantly affected by this large-scale plan, which aims to change the political geography of the region. On the other hand, in a more global perspective, the confrontation between the supporters and opponents of American policies in the international political arena might signal the decline of important institutions like the United Nations, NATO and even the E.U. (though the latter, a significantly low probability), which are to a great extent the creations of the Cold War . Therefore, the actual situation has to be evaluated, taking into account all these parameters.

In terms of the economy, the expectations of the AKP administration regarding E.U. and U.S. funds were, to the great frustration of the Turkish economy in crisis, not fulfilled. Despite the exaggerated hopes of the 58th government, the Copenhagen Meeting of December 2002, again a “Turkish Summit” comparable to the one organized in Luxembourg in 1997, did not produce positive results at all: under the domination of Germany and France, the two major players in the EU , talks concerning the possible entrance of Turkey into the E.U. were finally set on an ambiguous calendar and consequently, the dream of seeing European capital flow into the Turkish economy in huge quantities did not materialize. Indeed, for individuals who are familiar with the course of recent Turkish history and the complex nature of the Union’s internal dynamics, this decision was not a big surprise. Considerable U.S. financial backing in return for logistic support in the war against Iraq was apparently another potentially

crucial source of revenue for the new government in its efforts to satisfy at least temporarily the urgent economic difficulty the country finds itself in; however, the rejection of the motion primarily allowing the stationing of foreign troops on Turkish soil in the National Assembly made the transfer of these loans highly questionable. Although there is still a chance for a second motion, especially under Erdoğan as Prime Minister, one need not be a prophet to realize that this particular incident will shape the future of Turkish-American relations in the long run, in one way or another.

Since most of the attention is devoted to the tension between U.S. and Iraq, developments in national politics were largely viewed from this specific angle. In fact, the mutual uneasiness existing between the AKP government and secularist circles has remained more or less the same. Furthermore, the state apparatus, with the actions of some of its components effectively hindered a substantial part of the government's maneuvers, the most recent and significant example being the evolution of the Cyprus issue. Another development along the same lines was the proposal of Erkan Mumcu, Minister of Education (now, Minister of Culture), proposing to change the nature of the Council of Higher Education drastically. The result was to provoke reactions from a heterogeneous group, including even fierce opponents of the above-mentioned state institution.

The most remarkable incident in local politics was again related to the possible invasion of Iraqi territory by U.S. forces: the rejection of the resolution to aid America. The event contained more than a single message in itself: in the first place, it proves that AKP, though having a vast majority in the Parliament, is not a monolithic entity. The positions taken by outstanding figures like Bülent Arınç, Ertuğrul Yalçınbayır and

Mehmet Aydın reflect the internal dynamics of the party. Secondly, the power of Erdoğan as charismatic leader of the political movement was challenged seriously. Thirdly, in relation to the first and second points, the actual situation seems to prove that there is always a possibility for a leadership race, with the candidacy of important individuals influencing the ranks of AKP.

At the international level, Turkey's position becomes more and more difficult. The tense relation with the E.U. after the Copenhagen Summit almost reached a breaking point, especially with the recent Rauf Denktaş-Tassos Papadopoulos meeting in Lahey, which definitely paved the way for the refusal of the Annan (Hannay) Plan. As a matter of fact, Turkey was, more than once, the battlefield of the "Cold War" fought between the U.S. and the core of the E.U., the German-French axis. The first round of the conflict was Copenhagen: the very active involvement of President Bush in favor of the Turkish cause with the support of the European "south", namely Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal as well as Britain provoked outrage from the European "north" and produced a negative result, which certainly do not satisfy Turkish expectations. Here, it is important to underscore the personal differences between George Walker Bush and ex-President Bill Clinton and to observe in comparative perspective, how these differences shaped the perceptions of the European political élite in Helsinki 1999 and Copenhagen 2002. The second round was witnessed in NATO, when Turkey, the sole NATO member neighboring Iraq asked for alliance protection in case of an attack from Saddam Hussein: the same duo, backed this time by Belgium, was reluctant to provide the necessary diplomatic-military support. However, it is worth noting that the anti-war sentiment of the Turkish people and the Turkish Parliament, embodied in the rejection of the motion did not give Turkey a

favorable position in the eyes of its European counterparts, basically France and Germany. Furthermore, as noted earlier in the comments on the economy, the popularity of Turkey as a reliable ally, which could offer a democratic model to the Muslim world seems to have lost some of its importance in U.S. decision-making mechanisms.

As a second conclusion, it would be fair to say that the AKP government(s) has to face one of the most serious challenges in the history of the Republic, comparable maybe to the situation of the late İsmet İnönü before the great powers of the time, during the days of World War II. AKP's leading cadres are trying desperately to find a compromise between the requests of the U.S. and the sensitivities of the public in Turkey, taking into special consideration the feelings of its own electoral base. It is difficult to say that they have been successful in dealing with this extremely difficult task. Also, the silence of the opposition party, CHP, with the sole exception of debate of the failed resolution, is remarkable. Apparently, they are not ready to fulfill the role of a serious opposition party, shaping the atmosphere of the Parliament as well as public opinion. Remembering the section concluding the first part of this article, one can rightly note that neither of these parties do have sufficient preparations to overcome the tremendous problems of the country. For the moment, the picture before us seems to suggest that policies are not fully determined by the government: external factors, which are to a great extent out of their control, are unfortunately setting the agenda.

Let us finish with a note on the developments in the Middle East, which could have various repercussions on a global scale. The majority of historians believe that the subject matter of their profession has a Heracleitan character; in other words, it is almost impossible to witness the same historical instance twice. Yet, this perception does not

totally exclude the probability of drawing some parallels. With a certain caution, it can be said that today's events have some interesting similarities with the ones experienced in the early decades of the twentieth century, during and after World War I. In the current set of circumstances, only time will be able to tell us who are the contemporary Sharif Husayns or Sa'd Zaghluls and what are the contents of the new Sykes-Picot Agreements?