



Turkey: a maturing democracy

Nigar Göksel Common Ground News

August 3, 2007

Despite efforts by political rivals to spin the 22 July elections as a confrontation between Islamism and secularism (and the convenient adoption of this rhetoric by some in Europe who conceptualise global affairs and Turkey's EU membership along these lines), the focus in Turkey was largely on democratisation, economic growth and stability.

The conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has tackled problems that have been lingering on Turkey's agenda for decades. And economic growth has been unprecedented. Many factors came together to trigger the virtuous cycle the country has experienced. One need not resort to ideological reasoning to understand why the electorate voted for more of the same, with almost one of every two voters opting for the AKP. One also need not romanticise the AKP. It is a "majority government" with a pragmatic approach seizing the opportunities that international and domestic trends offer.

The EU anchor has played an important role in bringing about predictability in policies and thus confidence to businesspeople. Increased freedoms, coupled with the sense of direction, has been motivating and reassuring, with political, social and economic implications—each reinforcing the other. A virtuous circle was triggered by positive expectations based on the EU integration process and the structural changes it involves.

Despite complications revolving around the Cyprus issue, and the loss of motivation as the Turks watch politicians who run their campaign on anti-Turkey rhetoric win power one by one in European states, the opposition parties were mistaken in betting so heavily on EU-scepticism. Riding the wave of rising nationalism, the AKP's rivals, practically in chorus, criticised the government for 'surrendering' the country to the 'mercy' of Brussels at the expense of sovereignty, unity and security. Invoking notions of pride and honour was assumed to be the way to sway public opinion. Given the election results, it seems this style of populism does not impress the people; they have moved on, and the political class needs to catch up.

The political opposition failed to tackle the real issues. Rather than debating issues such as the need for a new constitution, the merits of the proposed public administration reform or the government's deficiencies with regards to freedom of expression, the opposition provoked nationalist sentiments, made absurd pledges as to how low they would price fuel-oil if they obtained power, and

created controversy over issues such as the headscarves worn by the wives of the AKP's core team. And the statement issued by the military implying their readiness to intervene if the main tenants of the Republic were further threatened by the AKP only backfired, increasing support for the AKP in the name of civilian politics.

It is not about secularism. AKP supporters include the growing middle class, businesspeople wanting to safeguard their investments, Kurds seeking increased rights, the average citizen who wants better performance from public institutions, the liberals concerned with inward-looking reactionism, young people who have felt patronised by the establishment, and the pious Muslims who have felt excluded by other circles.

To consolidate change and make this election's advancements permanent, both the election law and the party law need to be amended. As they currently stand, they create hierarchical political structures and reinforce patronage relationships. This system is not in line with the demands of an increasingly informed and participatory society. Moreover, the broad immunity granted to parliamentarians compromises the social sense of justice and accountability, and needs to be urgently addressed.

Turkey's problems have not ended, and the AKP will have to work hard to meet its new challenges. It needs to simultaneously bridge the divide between the demands of Kurdish nationalists and the positions of hardliners, and assure liberals that their lifestyles will not be overshadowed by the empowered conservative classes. The new parliament carries the potential either to mend social fault-lines or to further polarise.

In addition, other parties need to take stock and remodel themselves according to the expectations of the people. Turkey needs a strong opposition party to serve as a counterbalance to the AKP, with a fresh outlook and new faces, driven to offer a vision and compete on issues with the AKP.

Turkish democracy has matured in recent years. Europe needs more sophisticated templates to analyze the changes ongoing in the country. And, judging from the miscalculations of the opposition, so do the Turks themselves.

Nigar Goksel is a senior analyst at the European Stability Initiative in Turkey and Editor of Turkish Policy Quarterly.