

What direction for Turkey? A plea for political reconciliation

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Thirteen years of Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule in Turkey had provided a degree of stability and economic growth for the country from 2002-15 – a stability not seen since the 1980s under the premiership of Turgut Özal. But it has also had a damaging effect on civil liberties and the rule of law, especially since their second electoral victory in 2007.

On 10th October 2015, 97 people were killed in a peace rally in capital Ankara, perpetrated by two suicide bombers. In what was dubbed the “Turkish September 11” by Italy’s Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni, numerous activists from the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the People’s Democracy Party (HDP), as well as trade union members, lost their lives. This attack on demonstrators demanding peace was the biggest terrorist attack in Turkish history. So far no organisation has claimed responsibility for the attack, but for the government the main suspect is the so-called Islamic State (IS). It is clearly difficult to determine the culprits in attacks like this. If the perpetrators were indeed IS, this would demonstrate that the country’s borders have become more porous as civil wars are raging in Syria and Iraq. Any escalation in violence, by the PKK, IS or other organisations just before the elections is troubling. The radicalisation of Muslims and Kurds should be tackled through of education programmes and political negotiations with all the actors in Turkey.

Inconclusive elections

The election results of June 7th this year meant that the AKP was unable to form a government on its own for the first time since it came to power in 2002. After three consecutive victories at the polls and with increasing shares of the vote after each election, the 2015 elections proved something of a shock for the ruling party.

The critical outcome of the election was the passing of the 10% threshold by the HDP and its entry into parliament for the first time without cooperating with other parties or running as independents, as they did in the past. While this party has traditionally been the mouthpiece of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), in this election they used a more peaceful and liberal discourse, nominating Kurdish and non-Kurdish candidates who represent different groups in Turkish society, usually the underdogs, which appealed to urban secular Turks aiming to oust the government after ten years. This was a particularly interesting development as many individuals who had voted for the Kemalist Republican People’s Party and who tended to be middle or upper middle class, including journalists, academics and even bureaucrats, voted for the HDP in June 2015.

By way of illustration, a group of academics posted their decision to vote for the HDP on the internet in an attempt to prevent the AKP from changing the country from a parliamentary into a presidential

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system – the declared intent of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Numerous well-educated, secular, urban Turks and conservative Kurds supported the HDP for a number of reasons, the most significant of which was to limit the power and ambitions of AKP. We should not construe from this that upscale neighbourhoods in Istanbul and Ankara voted en masse for the HDP, but there was clearly a certain amount of sympathy for the party, especially for its co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş, who employed a non-patriarchal discourse in his speeches and statements. After years of the rigid political system in which the Turkish public saw the same old faces, Demirtaş seemed to be a young and egalitarian individual with a sense of humour and respect for women's and even LGBT rights.

This strategy seemed to have paid off because the party saw the highest vote (13%) in its history and was represented in the parliament. However, the peace process between the government and the PKK collapsed due to mutual recriminations and a lack of trust between the AKP and HDP. Subsequently, belligerent rhetoric gained the upper hand at the expense of negotiations. One cannot exclude a return to an era of violent clashes between the two parties and their supporters.

It should be noted that Kurds are represented in all the parties. There is a strong Kurdish presence in the AKP, for instance, both as cabinet ministers and members of parliament, and as political advisers. Their representation in the bureaucracy has also been significant. In this way, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu have ended what they called the era of denial of Kurdish identity and have allowed the broadcasting of Kurdish television and opened up Kurdish language departments at universities.

Between negotiations and warfare

Recently, the PKK killed nearly 200 people as it stepped up its military attacks on Turkish soldiers, policemen and civilians. The relationship between the PKK and the HDP seemed to be clear in the past but as of this year many people have been in a state of denial about the nature of the links and the hierarchical juxtaposition between the two organisations. Of course, it remains to be seen whether the HDP will have a more independent position vis-à-vis the PKK, but under the current state of affairs that likelihood seems remote.

The recent increase in attacks by the PKK against the security forces has demonstrated that the organisation has still not distanced itself from the use of violence. The European Union characterised these acts as “terrorist” and was quick to condemn them at the highest level, notably by the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk. He also expressed the EU's determination to “fight against PKK's presence in Europe”. On the other hand, the HDP is seen as a “legitimate counterpart” both in Turkey and elsewhere, which is the exact phrase uttered recently by the leader of Republican People's Party (CHP) at a talk in Brussels.

At the same time the PKK and its political wing, HDP, have a strong base in the Kurdish-populated regions of the country and in the major cities where there are large Kurdish populations, such as Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara, Adana and Mersin. The HDP also has a certain amount of legitimacy, both in Turkey and the EU, due to its participation in the elections.

AKP as a non-ethnic party?

In light of the escalation of violence by the PKK, the AKP has started using more nationalistic rhetoric, even though the party had adopted an ethnically neutral policy as far as Turks and Kurds are concerned, because for the majority of the ruling AKP elite, especially for Erdoğan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, the common bond and main marker of Turkish identity is Islam and the Ottoman past. In fact, Davutoğlu has declared himself to be anti-nationalist. Now, interestingly, the veteran nationalist politician Tuğrul Türkeş, son of the founder of Nationalist Action Party (MHP) Alparslan Türkeş, will run in the AKP list for the November elections. This might be an effort to cater to the conservative nationalist constituency in central and eastern Anatolia, as well as in the Black Sea region. But it is hard to tell whether his candidacy will garner nationalist votes for the AKP; a more important factor is probably the desire for stability, which will be discussed below.

In view of these recent developments, especially the attack on demonstrators in Ankara on 10th October, the government might be inclined to declare a state of emergency, which would have the support of the MHP. Since a significant number of the peace demonstrators were HDP members, it could increase sympathy towards that party. It could also bring about the further radicalisation of the party and its patron PKK since they might see themselves as besieged by the government.

Postponement of the elections is an option but an unlikely one because the country has now become more ideologically and culturally complex. Ruling a heterogeneous country with an iron fist is very difficult in this day and age. Centres of opposition are multifaceted and are sure to resist such moves.

Polarisation and the status of the media

Of course, President Erdoğan is a highly controversial and divisive figure who arouses feelings of both love and hate in the Turkish people. He is an embodiment of the politics of emotion. It is noteworthy that his younger followers seem ready to resort to force – one example is the attack on the *Hürriyet* newspaper, twice, by a mob led and organised by a member of parliament from the AKP, an individual who also happens to be the chairperson of the youth branch of the party. Furthermore, he continued his physical threats against a columnist writing for this paper, which resulted in a physical attack on the columnist by four members of the AKP. Needless to say, such behaviour is not conducive to the functioning of a free press. One positive note is that the person responsible for these attacks was not placed on the list of candidates for the November elections by the AKP leadership.

Overall, the polarisation between the government and secular Turks, as well as between Kemalist Turks and Kurdish nationalists, is on the rise.

Elections, once again

As Turkey goes back to the polls on November 1st, there could be a number of alternative outcomes. One is that the same political scene could emerge again; that is, a parliament with four political parties and the necessity to form a coalition in a country whose system of checks and balances between the three branches of government is seriously under threat. But a situation with no dominant party demands the formation of a coalition government, which would at least contribute to a culture of consensus.

Another possibility could be the strengthening of the AKP due to political instability in the country, which would result in its return to power. Concerns about coalition governments and the increasing climate of violence might well push the electorate towards the AKP. Such a state of affairs might emerge from the fear that the country could slide into civil war, meaning that only a single party government could ensure stability. While such an eventuality cannot be ruled out, it would not eradicate the anti-AKP sentiments among secular Turks, or Kurdish nationalists.

It is also possible that the opposition parties CHP or MHP could increase their votes and form a government on their own, or together. But the political polarisation in the country makes all these eventualities very hard to imagine.

The logical solution would be the reinstatement of the culture of reconciliation that existed between the left and the right in the early 1990s, despite the fact that the decade is seen today as a dark one due to the confrontations between the armed forces and the PKK. What we should remember is that the polarisation of the 1970s was overcome with the establishment of a coalition government in 1991, between centre-right and centre-left parties. For that to happen now, however, political parties and individuals will have to see each other as fellow citizens and not as mortal enemies.

Sadly, the 10th October massacre is only likely to increase the polarisation in the country, between the government and Kurdish nationalists, as well as between other opposition parties and the AKP. While elections will most probably be held on the expected date, the lack of trust between all the parties will remain. The most dangerous scenario would be Turkey's descent into ethnic and

sectarian conflict, similar to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. A negotiated social contract between all the ethnic and religious groups in the country would be one way out of this scenario. A republican concept of citizenship, without disregarding the fear of secular and nationalist Turks, culturally conscious Kurds, traditionally religious Sunni Muslims, as well as those groups who have been subjected to discrimination such as the Alevis, Armenians, Syriacs, Jews, and Greeks should be negotiated through communication, empathy and consensus-building. An important step would be the passing of a hate-speech law to address religious and racial stereotypes and threats of violence.

Turkey – between Europe and the Middle East

The European Union should contribute more actively to Turkey's security concerns and offer incentives to continue on the path of EU membership, which would help to prevent the radicalisation of numerous groups. If membership is out of the question, then other platforms for cooperation should be negotiated between Turkey and the EU. The EU should speak in a candid manner and make clear what kind of future relationship it envisages for Turkey.

The European Union is in a position to contribute to the process of de-escalation in Turkey. As the country has recently become more Middle Eastern than European, the EU can emphasise Turkey's European orientation, adopted in the 19th century and initiated under the Ottoman Empire. Westernisation reforms were reinforced by Atatürk in the republican era and continued even under the present government, in its early years. In the face of the multiple and interlocking crises affecting the wider Middle East and Europe, the EU and Turkey should explore ways of cooperation on a number of topics, the most urgent of which is the migration crisis. To address this and other issues, the EU and Turkey should convene high-level summits on a regular basis to address the specific crises at hand. Mutual trust between the two sides should be re-established by close mechanisms of consultation. The belief in democracy and human rights and a commonality of values is a significant link between the two entities, and the strategic dimension in the bilateral and multilateral liaisons also needs to be emphasised. The EU and Turkey cannot afford a rupture in their relations, because cooperation is in both their interests.