

Introduction

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Turkey is facing a critical political turning point. The rupture of the Gezi protests of May–June 2013 was followed by a spate of corruption allegations against the AKP (Justice and Development Party) in December 2013 and the unleashing of a power struggle between the AKP and the Fethullah Gülen movement. The successes of the AKP in the local elections of March 2014 and in the vote of August 2014, which saw its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, rise to the presidency with a large percentage of the vote, were followed by the loss of a parliamentary majority in the national elections of June 2015. The failure of the political parties to form a government after the vote meant that the country went through new elections in November 2015. The AKP won the elections with increased majority. These developments are taking place within an increasingly troubled domestic context, with the peace process between the government and the Kurdish minority collapsing and the ugly spectre of violence and war once again haunting the country. Violence and war are also affecting Turkey from the south, with the Arab uprisings of 2011 having unleashed turmoil in the Middle East region as a whole and particularly in neighbouring Syria.

The current juncture of Turkish history, following 13 years of uninterrupted AKP parliamentary dominance, offers an interesting vantage point from which to ponder the question of Turkish democracy. The balance sheet, as always, is a mixed one. The political success of the AKP has been impressive: it is rarely that a party has increased its majority while in government, as the AKP did in the second and third contests it faced, in 2007 and 2011, following the initial victory of 2002. The length and endurance of the AKP's electoral success have eliminated the need for coalition governments. This has offered the country a period of extended political stability which has not only allowed the economy to thrive but may also have contributed to the maturation and smoother functioning of state institutions and political processes. More intangibly, popular engagement and a sense of participation may possibly turn out to have increased the sense of ownership of the political process in wide segments of the Turkish public.

The greater positive contribution to Turkish democracy of the 13 years of AKP government, however, must be that it has broken the Kemalist establishment's hold on power. Whatever our assessment of the values, practices and ideas of any given political formation or party, we must agree that democracy requires political pluralism. If democracy is seen as the most important value and goal for a polity, then alternation in

government is necessary. The AKP has represented a counter-narrative to the Kemalist establishment in Turkey, being, as it is, a party with Islamist roots (though it rejects the label of an Islamist party itself). It has also embodied the advent of a political, social and economic counter-elite. The defanging of the Turkish military and its being dragged down from its pedestal as the guardian of the Turkish state have been the main outcome of this alternation. Whatever the true motives behind this development, it can only be a positive one, given that in a democracy there must be civilian oversight of the army. The same can be said about the opposition to the AKP: it is admittedly in a position of weakness currently but when that is overcome, and it reaches the point of being able to challenge the AKP, it will have done so on the back of its own efforts to convince and mobilise the Turkish public – not with the support of the Kemalist establishment or a sense of entitlement.

The other side of the balance sheet, however, is long and growing at an alarming rate. If the arrival of a counter-narrative and a counter-elite is a healthy sign, their continuing dominance is beginning to be problematic in itself: to put it simply, the AKP has been too powerful for too long for the good of Turkish democracy. There are two issues here: majoritarianism and Islamisation. With each year of its being in government, the AKP has used the support of the majority of the electorate to disregard the views of and indeed trample on the minority. The rule of law, freedom of the press and the separation of powers have increasingly suffered, as seen in the Ergenekon trials and the witch-hunt against the Fethullah Gülen movement. Turkey is notorious for imprisoning and persecuting its journalists. The government, particularly in the person of prime minister and later president Erdoğan, is emitting a more and more intolerant and authoritarian discourse. An additional worrying sign is a creeping Islamisation not only of the public sphere but also of social life, education and culture. The areas of women, gender and sexuality are of particular concern here. Even in the complex sphere of foreign policy, one can observe a sectarian (Sunni) element in operation. With regard to the most important problem facing Turkish democracy, namely the Kurdish issue, hopes that there would be progress in resolving it were dashed in 2014–15. In addition, Turkey remains divided along ideological, as well as ethnic, lines, with the split between Kemalists and Islamists – and the suspicion, unease and disquiet it brings with it – remaining unbridgeable. This is an obstacle to the smooth running of a democratic polity which requires a considerable degree of consensus and cooperation.

The major questions which surround the future of democracy in Turkey are about institutions and attitudes. The progress achieved over the past few decades, and, indeed, over the past few years, in that direction must not be underestimated. However, the flaws and problems remain profound, and there has been regression in many areas. It is clear that institutions are still not sufficiently robust and the toleration of difference not sufficiently developed for Turkey to be said to have achieved the status of a mature democracy.

It is to address as many aspects of the above issues as possible that the Middle East Centre and the Chair in Contemporary Turkish Studies at LSE organised a panel discussion and a workshop on the state of democracy in Turkey on 19–20 March 2015. The panel addressed the questions of women, popular attitudes towards democracy and state–civil society relations. The workshop focused on state institutions and the rule of law (the constitution; the judiciary, the legislature and the separation of powers; security sector reform); civil society and political culture (the political opposition; minority issues; LGBT rights and gender); and the question of democracy in the context of foreign relations (the influence of international norms and institutions on legal reform, the impact of the EU accession process and the question of the Middle East). We were honoured by the attendance of an impressive range of academic participants, although unfortunately Professor Talip Küçükcan of Marmara University was unable to attend.

A selection of the papers presented at the panel and workshop is published here, under the auspices of the Middle East Centre. They do not represent all our discussions but focus on some of their key aspects. Deniz Kandiyoti's paper on the gender wars in Turkey argues that the politicisation of gender issues is 'triggered by the fact that stirring up moral anxieties over women's conduct and propriety had become one of the key pillars of the AKP's populist discourse: a discourse that pits a virtuous "us" – the real people – against an immoral "them"'. The paper tracks the gains in terms of women's rights in the early years of the AKP and their unravelling in the later AKP period. Examining the impact of legal reform and the role of civil society on human rights, Emma Sinclair-Webb 'reflects on how Turkey's presentation of legislative changes as progress under the scrutiny of the EU, UN and Council of Europe helped skew the facts and divert attention from the lack of institutional underpinning for reform, the lack of political accountability, judicial independence and oversight mechanisms, and other structural factors with implications for a culture of rights'. She argues, in a nutshell, that 'a legalistic approach has substituted for a real commitment to reform'. Meltem Müftüler-Baç argues that 'in 2015, it is possible to witness a different outcome: a stalled negotiation process with dim prospects for Turkey's accession to the EU, and a backsliding into authoritarianism in the country'. She tracks the impact of political conditionality by the EU on domestic democratic reform in Turkey and its unintended consequences, which include majoritarian authoritarianism. Since 2011 in particular democratic consolidation 'has taken a nosedive'. Yaprak Gürsoy, writing on security sector reform in Turkey, argues that despite some gains in civil–military relations (though civilian control over the military is not complete), reform in the police and intelligence sectors has not resulted in democratisation, mainly because the motives behind the reform have been politically charged, with the aim of 'creating loyal security services'.