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Election 2011: The More Turkey Changes, the More Its Political Parties Stay the Same

LSE Ideas

By BARIN KAYAOĞLU

There is much cause for optimism and pessimism on the eve of Turkey's 12 June general election. The ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) will most likely win. But AKP chairman, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is becoming increasingly [hostile to the opposition](#) and the opposition is [responding in kind](#). Unless its political parties mend their ways, there is a not-so-slight danger that domestic instability may hamper Turkey's international [rise after 12 June](#).

An Emerging Power

Turkey has been rapidly changing for the better in recent years. Per capita income grew from less than \$3,000 in 2000 to \$10,000 in 2010. Turkey [recovered from the global recession](#) by growing faster than any other country save China. Overall, Turkey avoided the fate of other economies – bank failures and expensive bailouts – thanks to its new trading partners in the [east and south](#). In 2002, Turkish trade with the Arab world and Iran had stood at a modest \$6.5 billion. By the end of 2010, it reached \$50 billion.

Similarly, Ankara had been content with its Cold War alliances until the late 1990s – the United States, Europe, and Israel. Today, Turkish decision-makers are building new partnerships to spearhead positive change in their neighborhood and around the world. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, a professor of international relations, is the architect of the new policy. His flashy “zero problems with neighbors” slogan captures his country's regional and global vision. By capitalizing on its large population and dynamic economy, Turkey wants to become the political and economic fulcrum at the crossroads of the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East.

To that end, Ankara served as non-permanent member at the UN Security Council in 2009-10 and has just announced its intention to sit at the Council again in 2015-16. Ankara also mediated indirect talks and came very close to forging a peace accord between Israel and Syria on the eve of the Gaza war of 2008-9. In the Caucasus, the AKP government took bold steps to overcome its troublesome past with Armenia. In the Balkans, Turkey is working hard to facilitate genuine reconciliation among the Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks. Last year, with Ankara's encouragement, Serbian President Boris Tadic attended the commemoration ceremony for the victims of the 1995 genocide in Srebrenica.

In order to improve its relations with Arab countries, Turkey has reciprocally repealed travel visas with Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Libya, and Qatar. Last summer, Turkey agreed to create a [free trade zone](#) with Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. In the wake of the Arab Spring, Turkey's ability to bring together a secular democratic political order in a Muslim majority country that is friendly to both East and West may serve as a model.

Turkey's “soft power” is also on the rise. Many Turkish TV series are now being broadcast in local languages in nearly a dozen countries in the Balkans, the Middle East, North Africa, the Persian Gulf, and Central Asia. Turkish film-makers are winning awards at prestigious film festivals around the world. Last week, director Nur Bilge Ceylan's “Once Upon a Time in Anatolia” won the Grand Prix at Cannes. Turkey, in short, is opening up to the world in every conceivable way.

Turkey's Democratic Leap Forward

Domestic stability is the primary cause of Turkey's rise in the international scene: The once all-powerful military has yielded the floor to civilian politicians. Under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who had cut his teeth in politics as an Islamist in the 1990s, the AKP sent the military back to its barracks as it oversaw rapid economic growth and political liberalization since 2002.

Meanwhile, the once staunchly secular and nationalist main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) is now led by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu – an Alevi Kurd who is trying to recapture the party's social democratic momentum from the 1970s. Under Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu, CHP is struggling to present itself as a viable alternative to Mr. Erdoğan's AKP.

Similarly, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which was responsible for much of the political violence in the run-up to the military coup of September 1980, has long become a much more moderate group.



Turkey's Leader

As for Kurdish politicians, for the first time in the history of the Republic of Turkey, they are allowed to use their mother tongue during campaigns. Until recently, simply speaking Kurdish in public would have meant trouble. Today, however, the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) openly discusses controversial topics such as regional autonomy and PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's release from prison. The PKK is designated as a terrorist group by the United States and the European Union and has fought for an independent Kurdish state in Southeast Turkey since 1984.

Old Habits

But old habits are dying hard and political parties in Turkey are having trouble adapting to the country's new order. Although the AKP passed hundreds of laws that have enabled Turkey to start accession negotiations with the European Union in 2005, political and economic reforms have all but ground to a halt in recent years. Government control over the market – especially through [rewarding bids to political supporters](#) and internet censors – has gotten worse.

Similarly, the recent arrest of several journalists – ostensibly for being part of Ergenekon, a clandestine network alleged to have planned several coups d'état in 2003-5 – demonstrates that the future of free speech and democracy in Turkey is under threat. Turkey recently surpassed both Iran and China by having [57 journalists in prison](#).

That's not all. Last month, some 2,000 high school students protested fraud allegations in college entrance exams in Taksim Square in Istanbul. Prime Minister Erdoğan threatened to retaliate with his party's youth chapters. In response, MHP chairman Devlet Bahçeli threatened the Prime Minister with a ["bozkurt" counter-march](#) ("bozkurt" literally means "greywolf" and is the nickname for a MHP supporter). "Mr. Prime Minister," called out Mr. Bahçeli, reminiscent of his party's pre-1980 days, "you get 10,000 of your militants there and my bozkurts and I will chase you out of Taksim!"

Not that the CHP is doing significantly better. Despite Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu's kindhearted image and his emphasis on liberty, equality, and democracy, his party's old guard has other priorities. A few months ago, a CHP deputy sued the producers of a comic-book depicting the youth of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. Any negative comments against Turkey's founding father had been deemed an "insult" in the past. The CHP deputy continued that tradition, claiming that the comic-book had ["insulted" Atatürk](#). Ironically, the comic-book was very much a glorification of Atatürk.

For their part, Kurdish politicians and the BDP cannot keep up with Turkey's rapid transformation either. They fail to distinguish their demands for equal rights for Turkey's 10 to 15 million Kurds from the PKK's violent agenda. The BDP has yet to come up with new ideas to help solve the country's gangrenous Kurdish question.

All these factors may have ominous implications for Turkey after 12 June. Surveys estimate that the AKP and Mr. [Erdoğan will win](#). But the Prime Minister's increasing authoritarianism, his inability to solve the Kurdish question, and his prospects of becoming president once the current president's term ends might exacerbate social tensions, alienate political opponents, and deteriorate political stability.

Mr. Erdoğan wants Turkey to affect positive change in its neighborhood. Many people in Turkey – including his opponents – also want that. But if the political elite in Turkey wish to make their country a source of inspiration for economic development and political democracy in the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East, they have to change their old habits.

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LSE IDEAS Events

LSE IDEAS will organize the event "Turkey in the World" at the London School of Economics. **15 June 2011, 6.30pm, Old Theatre**. Speakers: Professor Sevet Pamuk, Hadi Hakura, Professor Michael Cox

[Read IDEAS new report on Turkey's Global Strategy](#)

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