



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

Position Paper

Prospects for a Future Role for Erdogan in a New Political System



Al Jazeera Centre for Studies
Tel: +974-44663454
jcforstudies@aljazeera.net
<http://studies.aljazeera.net>

Al Jazeera Center for Studies

14 October 2012

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan will most likely contest the presidency of the Turkish republic in less than two years. There are several indications that he is making the position of the president more powerful than it currently is. Since becoming prime minister, Erdogan, has certainly asserted his will. This, however, does not mean that the path to a more influential presidency will be easy.

Erdogan: Prospects for a Future Role in a New Political System

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) recently organised its fourth conference since its founding in 2001. The conference, on Sunday, 30 September 2012 in the Turkish capital Ankara, was assumed to be the last general conference headed by Erdogan, party leader and prime minister. He ensured that the conference became an important display of support for the party, reflecting the influence of both the party and its leader. The conference would also be intended to be a regional political showcase, where Turkey's increasing regional influence could be displayed, showing its heightened influence to be a result of Erdogan's foreign policy. The conference was attended by more than 14 000 party activists and members; many could not be accommodated in the huge conference hall. The event was also followed by millions of Turks in the media. A large contingent of foreign guests, including politicians from various eastern countries, such as Egyptian President Muhammad Mursi; Hamas leader Khaled Mesh'al; the head of Iraq's Kurd region, Massoud Barzani; and heads of Central Asian states.

The AKP's plan for Turkey's advancement until 2023 was unveiled at the conference. That year will also mark the first centenary of the founding of the Turkish Republic. Erdogan pointed out another plan to take Turkey into the decade of the 2070s. Erdogan's three-hour long speech was undoubtedly the highlight of the conference. It covered a range of issues, from the country's history and political position to the economy, development and foreign affairs. It also included poetic references which reduced thousands of his supporters to tears. For the first time, Erdogan hinted at his vision for his personal future and Turkey's political future which he seems to be working for.

According to the regulations governing the work of AKP, any party deputy with a parliamentary seat, including the prime minister, and who has served for three parliamentary sessions should give up the seat and refrain from contesting elections for at least one parliamentary session. Thus, Erdogan cannot run again after the end of this parliamentary session and will not be able to retain his position as head of government. The still relatively young party has, since its inception, been closely associated with the person of Erdogan. In fact, because of his success as head of government, a position he assumed in 2002, the executive leadership of the party has tried to persuade him to change the party regulations to allow him to continue leading the party and, potentially,

the country. But Erdogan has resisted and has insisted that his current term will be his last as prime minister. The question of his political future has been a central focus in political circles over the past few months, both within and without the AKP.

In his speech at the conference, Erdogan did not say he would retire from politics or that the current mandate represents the end of his political career. Indeed, what he said was quite different. He clarified that he would continue serving the party and the Turkish nation in any other role. This was the first indication that the prime minister is looking at standing for the position of president, a position currently held by fellow AKP founder member Abdullah Gul. There has been much speculation about this issue in circles close to the prime minister.

Some important questions beg answers. What are the challenges to Erdogan becoming president? Will he accept the position as it currently stands – a largely symbolic position with limited powers? And, what will the future of the AKP be when Erdogan is no longer head of government?

Engineering a New Constitution for the Republic

Two days after the conference Erdogan again hinted at his intentions. In an address to his party's parliamentary group, the prime minister said: 'We did not oppress anyone ... and we hope to develop a new constitution together as a nation. ... The timing is clear: either the work will be completed by the end of this year, or we will proceed on our way and no one should waste our time.'

Erdogan was implying that the parliamentary committee would write the constitution. This committee was formed by the ruling party, which has a majority in parliament, and is comprised of three members from each of the four main parties in parliament – the AKP and the three opposition parties: the Republican People's Party (CHP), National Party and the Peace and Democracy Party. Since it began its work, the committee has been chaired by [Cemil Çiçek](#), speaker of the Turkish parliament. Although the AKP programme which was presented to the electorate in the last election promised a new constitution, this is the first time that Erdogan made the constitution an explicit priority for his government.

The parties in parliament reached an agreement in October / November 2011 on the formation of a constitutional committee and approved a deadline of December 2012. But Erdogan's crucial announcement for the need to develop a draft constitution by the deadline means he is pinning his hopes on a new constitution being drafted. It also suggests that his party will go it alone in drafting the constitution if the four-party constitutional committee fails to reach unanimity on a draft.

Since the issue of the constitution emerged in political debate, Erdogan made no secret of his desire that the new constitution should lead to a restructuring of the Turkish political system. He wants to convert Turkey into a presidential state, but he does recognise that moving the country in a single step from the parliamentary system to a presidential system will not be easy. Therefore, the AKP will more likely push for a constitution that divides powers between the prime minister and the president, a system that will be closer to the French one. The AKP's hope for a new governance structure is encouraged by constitutional amendments approved by the Turkish parliament in 2008. For the first time in the history of the republic, parliament approved the nation's direct election of its president instead of the traditional Turkish system – since the establishment of the republic – wherein the president was elected by parliament.

Thus, in the upcoming presidential elections in August 2014, the president will be elected by a direct vote for the first time in Turkish history. This will result in a situation which will raise questions about the legitimacy and the basis for the powers of the prime minister and the president. This is what Erdogan is relying on in his quest to rebuild the political system. In other words, as long as the people vote directly for their president and then vote directly for a parliamentary majority and hence the prime minister, why should the powers of the prime minister be superior to those accorded to the president of the republic?

In less than two years Erdogan will probably contest for the presidency of the republic and he is working intensively to ensure that the position of president will be more powerful than it currently is. Since assuming the position of prime minister, Erdogan has imposed his will by some or other means. But this does not imply that the road to a strong presidency is paved or smooth.

One scenario is that AKP members in the constitutional committee might not be able to convince representatives of the opposition parties to change the political system. Such a constitutional provision may necessitate intense bargaining with one or more opposition parties. Another scenario is that the constitutional committee does adopt a draft constitution by consensus, in which case the draft will be approved in parliament by a majority larger than the required two-thirds for the adoption of a new constitution or constitutional amendments. But if the constitutional committee fails to reach consensus before the end of the year, the AKP will need the votes of the National Party's parliamentary bloc to achieve a two-thirds majority, or the ruling party will have to take the draft to a popular referendum. In the case of a referendum, there is no certainty that a majority of the voters will approve a new constitution that includes a significant change in the structure of a political system which Turks are accustomed to. Another complication is the position of the current president, Abdullah Gul, and the future of the AKP.

Gul's Paths and the AKP

Abdullah Gul assumed the presidency of the republic in the summer of 2007 in a climate of political polarisation stemming from his wife's headscarf, his Islamic background and the opposition's fear about the AKP's control of state resources. IN subsequent years, however, Gul succeeded in gaining the confidence of large segments of the population and advanced his position to become a symbol of unity and to maintain a balance between state institutions and its various arms. Because the position of President of the Republic may change in the new constitution from one seven-year term to two four-year terms and will change in 2014 from a parliamentary ballot to direct popular vote, Gul has the right to run for president again if he so wishes. For Erdogan to move into the presidency, Gul must refrain from competing for the position.

To date, Gul has not made his position clear. But the president, who is linked to Erdogan through a sense of camaraderie and a deep friendship and who remembers that the party leader supported his candidacy for president despite the risks that had surrounded his candidacy, would find it difficult to compete against Erdogan in the presidential elections, or to compete for the position in the face of opposition from the ruling AKP – even if Erdogan did not enter the race.

The scenario that is most frequently discussed in ruling party circles is an exchange of positions between the two men. Thus Erdogan will run in the presidential elections with the support of the AKP and Gul will leave the presidency to lead the AKP in the upcoming parliamentary elections to become the prime minister of the country. There is no confirmation that Erdogan, who has a powerful grip on the party, supports such a scenario. But those who consider this an option argue that it is not merely a deal to satisfy Gul and save the AKP from division and decline after Erdogan's departure from parliament. Despite the presence of more than one strong candidate to succeed Erdogan, including the foreign minister Dr Ahmet Davutoglu, Abdullah Gul alone has the legitimacy, experience and influence necessary to lead the party and fill the vacuum that would be left by Erdogan.

Erdogan's loyal supporters are not taking this or similar scenarios lightly. They say Gul cannot stand against the will of the AKP if it decides to nominate Erdogan for the presidency. Furthermore, they argue that it is possible for the party not only to come up with a new constitution with a mixed system of government but also to create a constitutional formulation as had existed before 1961 when it was not required for the president to abandon his party affiliation. Thus, Erdogan could become president without having to give up the presidency of the AKP even after the end of his parliamentary tenure. This group believes that Erdogan will continue to lead the AKP, enhance the party's roots in political life and in the political awareness of Turks, and that the party

would become viable without historical or charismatic leadership like that of the current prime minister.

On the other hand, supporters of Abdullah Gul say he will not accept a return to partisan politics and will not accept the position of a prime minister – in the event that a new constitution is adopted – with weakened or reduced powers even if a majority within the party called for his return.

Forthcoming Deals

Since the 1960 coup and the overthrow of the Democratic Party, which lasted ten consecutive years, there has not been a party that enjoyed the dominant popular political support as the AKP does. Not even Adnan Menderes, the leader of the Democratic Party and the first democratically-elected Turkish prime minister, had the support, power and influence that Erdogan enjoys. It is natural for Erdogan, who is not yet sixty-years old, to intend to continue his political career after giving up leadership of the government. It is unsurprising, in the tradition of the Turkish Republic, for the prime minister to become the president of the republic – as had occurred with Ismet Inonu, Suleyman Demirel and Turgut Ozal. Politics has been Erdogan's life and profession for decades. In a country that did not enjoy great successes in the past century, it can be argued that he has, as a politician, achieved a huge amount in Turkey in the past ten years.

But it seems that Erdogan is asking for more than the position of president; he wants a new kind of presidency, one with concrete powers that will help him achieve his ambition to continue to play a decision-making role in the republic. This strong politician does not plan to retire, and he does not envisage a retirement in a presidency with symbolic powers.

In order for Erdogan to achieve his ambition to continue as an active player in the management of affairs of the country, a set of favourable developments must take place: persuading Gul not to run again for the presidency; completing a draft constitution that will fulfil at least the minimum requirement for restructuring the political system and strengthening of presidential powers; adoption of the draft constitution in parliament or in a referendum; and finding an appropriate way to fill the leadership vacuum in the AKP when Erdogan withdraws. The last requirement will be achieved either by keeping Erdogan as head of the party or by party leaders agreeing on a new leader who has the necessary skills and ability to lead. In addition to these challenges, the AKP will also face the potential risk of a decline in economic growth and the stewardship of the Turkish economy and the country's public finances in the next critical stage.

During his term as prime minister, Erdogan showed superior tactical skill which enabled him to face a series of dilemmas and crises and move his government and party toward more influence. It is not unlikely that with the political capital and political experience he has accumulated over the years, he will be able to achieve a smooth transition from being the prime minister to becoming the president.

Al Jazeera Center for Studies

Copyright © 2012 Al Jazeera Center for Studies, All rights reserved.