

Erdoğan at the height of his power: Eight years of AKP rule in Turkey

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On 3 November 2002, only one year after it was founded, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) recorded a surprising electoral victory by winning thirty-five percent of the seats in the Turkish parliament. Because of the form of that country's electoral system, this electoral victory enabled the AKP to govern on its own, without having to forge alliances with other parties to be able to govern.

As recently as four years ago, most experts in Turkish affairs were still anticipating the imminent downfall of the head of the AKP, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and, thus, of the Turkish government. They expected his impending fall to be occasioned either by direct interference from the army, or by the combined pressure brought to bear by traditional secular circles, which had exercised significant influence on the state, and by the political opposition.

However, as is indicated by the current situation, the incumbent head of the Turkish government – supported by his party – represents the strongest ruler the Republic of Turkey has known since the days of Mustafa Kemal. While the world is concerned about the active and dynamic role played by Turkey in the arena of foreign affairs, Prime Minister Erdoğan is busy consolidating his domestic power and reproducing his influence across Turkish political life. In so doing, he is rebuilding the institutions of the republic according to a new political paradigm.

Two stages of AKP rule

The leaders of the AKP are regarded, for the most part, as new actors in the life of the Turkish state. Because of this, the first stage in the governance of Turkey by the AKP was distinguished by the fact that it focused on developing its familiarity with the mechanisms of governance and of running the state, and by endeavouring to dispel the original impressions it had created. Those initial impressions were generated by the rise to prominence of a party whose political leaders came from an Islamic political background, especially from the ranks of the Rifah (Welfare) Party.

When the AKP was established, its leaders agreed that it should represent the interests of the people, and be founded on a system of government capable of realising the integration between state and society. In spite of such founding aspirations, the programme of reforms of Erdoğan's government during the AKP's first tenure of rule was quite broad, and it avoided tackling thorny issues such as the extremely sensitive topics of the role of the military establishment in ruling the country and the Kurdish question.

However, the huge economic successes which were manifested in the course of Erdoğan's first term in government, and which managed to double the national income within five years, as well as the consolidation of Turkey's influence in foreign affairs contributed on the one hand to strengthening Erdoğan's confidence to address domestic issues, while, on the other hand, they increased his opponents' fierce determination to overthrow him and his government.

In May 2006, a prominent judge was assassinated in the second chamber of the Council of State, Turkey's highest court. Since Judge Mustafa Yucel Ozbilgin had been on record as having opposed Islamic tendencies in the country, it was clear that whoever had planned his assassination intended to have incriminating fingers pointed at the Islamic movement for this incident. They had hoped that such an event would lay the ground, together with other similar occurrences, for a state of chaos which would undermine national peace and security and the smooth and efficient governance of the country.

Contrary to such expectations, the rapid successes in uncovering the forces behind the assassination gradually led to the discovery and exposure of a far-reaching and deeply rooted secret network planted both inside the state and within the society. This wide network had been, over many decades, an instrument that ensured the political hegemony over the state and society of a certain elite made up of members of the military establishment and traditional secular forces from civil society. The subsequent successes in the investigation represented the true beginning of the second phase in the rule of the AKP. It was during this second phase that the political priorities of the AKP emerged in greater relief.

In the summer of 2007, at the end of the term of office of President Ahmad Najdat Sezer, the ruling party nominated its minister of foreign affairs, Abdullah Gül, as its candidate for president of the republic. The divisions which were caused by the announcement of Gül's candidature, along with the overt interference in the matter by the military chiefs of staff, resulted in the convening of the 2007 parliamentary elections. Erdoğan, at the helm of his party, guided the AKP to a significant electoral victory, as evidenced by its winning forty-seven percent of the seats in parliament. Such a resounding triumph catapulted Gül to the presidency, and strengthened Erdoğan's confidence that he possessed sufficient political muscle to change the conditions within the country and to reform the republican system.

The aborted attempt to disband the AKP in March 2008 by the Chief Office of Prosecution and the Constitutional Court represented the last major confrontation between that party and the traditional secular elite. The next three years, in fact, witnessed the crystallisation of Erdoğan's forceful steps to tackle the Kurdish problem, the issue of women's veiling, civil liberties and human rights, the issue of democratic reform, and the definitive eradication of the hegemony, both overt and covert, exercised by the military establishment over the Turkish government.

Indicators of Erdoğan's rising power

There are a number of interwoven indicators pointing to Erdoğan's success in conclusively resolving, to his advantage, most of the domestic challenges he was confronted by. The most prominent of these challenges are discussed below.

1. The loyalty and determination of a single representative of the public prosecution, since 2006, assisted in the gradual unmasking of a large part of the secret structures which had existed for a long time inside the body politic of the Turkish state. These secret structures, which are now collectively known as the Ergenekon network, thrived in the military establishment and the organs of state which enforced law and order, as well as in the Turkish judiciary, media and administration. The ongoing exposure of Ergenekon, and of the numerous political offences perpetrated by its members, resulted in an ever-growing number of the members of the network being arraigned for trial, and in the instilling of fear in other involved people, including some of the major officers occupying top positions in the army.
2. In the midst of the global financial crisis that also affected Turkey, the Department of Justice and the judiciary (most probably at the instigation of Prime Minister Erdoğan himself), proceeded to place the large Dogan media group, which had wielded far-reaching influence in Turkish society, under meticulous scrutiny, and to subject it to accountability for its operations. This eventually led to the formulation of criminal charges for a massive evasion of taxes, valued in excess of four billion Turkish liras (more than three billion US dollars), against Dogan. The media group, which owns eight daily newspapers, including the influential Hürriyet, Milliyet and Radikal, as

well as several periodicals, many television stations, and a news agency, is viewed as the fortified citadel of secular opposition, as well as a dogged adversary of Erdoğan and his government. The matter involving the Dogan group is still the subject of judicial investigation. The name and reputation of the group has begun to deteriorate, and it has now become clear that its chairman will be forced to resort to the sale of Dogan either as an entire group, or, at the very least, to dismember its unified structure and sell off most of its constituent parts.

3. Notwithstanding the concerns surrounding the popular referendum on a cluster of constitutional amendments that was held in September this year, Erdoğan had set his firm resolve on introducing such amendments and testing the extent of public support for their implementation through that referendum. Since he led the popular campaign for getting the amendments to pass through dozens of assemblies, the referendum's success is viewed as a victory for the political programme of Erdoğan's government and as a personal victory for him.
4. The relevant constitutional amendments included three major reforms of Turkey's state institutions. All three can be interpreted to be to the advantage of the ruling Justice and Development Party, and to contribute to the weakening of the traditional secular elite and its influential power base within the state and governmental institutions.
 - The constitutional amendments place the army under the authority of civilian rule, and grant the civil judicial process the right to try army personnel, whether retrospectively for past offences, or prospectively for crimes to be committed in future. By virtue of these amendments, it is possible to declare that the army 'has retreated into its barracks' for the first time since the bloody upheaval of 1960.
 - The constitutional amendments redesign the structure of the Supreme Council of Judges and Prosecutors, and increase the number of its members. This Council is the institutional body that has authority to transfer, appoint and professionally develop judges and public prosecutors. It used to represent one of the outstanding traditional fortresses of the secular elite. The election of a section of the members of the newly restructured council, which were held earlier this month, revealed that ten out of eleven of the candidates nominated and backed by the Ministry of Justice had succeeded in becoming members of the council.
 - The amendments, moreover, expand the scope of membership of the council and bring about a restructuring of the Constitutional Court, which is the highest judicial tribunal within the Turkish state. For a long period of time, this court served as a sword in the hands of the radical secular elite, and was wielded and used against all new political authorities. Such a scenario has been nullified by the reconstruction of the Constitutional Court, which is also expected to extensively work in favour of the government controlled by the AKP.
5. The referendum on the constitutional amendments exposed the wide-scale disarray which presently affects the ranks of the two main opposition parties: the Nationalist Movement Party and the Republican People's Party. While the grass-roots of these two popular parties view the constitutional amendments as an aid to democracy and the promotion of civil liberties and justice in the country, the leadership of the parties opposed the amendments. This state of disarray contributed to the weakening of these

parties, and has assisted the AKP to become even more popular. The latest surveys reflecting public opinion in the country reveal that the popularity of the Justice and Development Party exceeds fifty percent, the first time that that has occurred since 2002.

6. The measures adopted by the government to bring Turkey out of the world financial and economic crisis during the second half of 2010 were proven to be the correct ones. Current projections indicate that the Turkish economy will register a seven percent annual growth rate this year, that is, a rate far exceeding the growth rates of all the major European economies. At the same time, the average growth rate of Turkish exports in October 2010 exceeded ten percent for the first time since the outbreak of the global financial and economic crisis.
7. Erdoğan seized the opportunity conferred on him by the huge success he achieved in the referendum to initiate a strategic review of the Turkish State. In doing so, he reopened the file known as ‘the Red Book’, which is considered to be the principal reference work for the activities of the military establishment, their methods of training and armament, the state’s foreign policy, and the way the state views both internal and external threats. Notwithstanding the fact that this strategic document is protected as a state secret, the press leakages in this connection create the well-founded belief that the new draft adopted by Turkey’s National Security Council in October 2010 includes the classification of Israeli nuclear weapons and Iran as sources of external threat. This classification is apparently accompanied by the statement that ‘the lack of stability in the region as a result of Israeli activities and policies may cause a nuclear arms race in the region, and pose a threat to Turkey’. The new strategic paper has removed Syria, Iran, Bulgaria, Georgia, Armenia, and, most significantly, Russia, from the list of states deemed to represent external threats to Turkey. In addition, it is believed that the new strategic paper has erased the reference found in its predecessor to ‘the danger posed by religious reactionary forces’ to Turkish national security. This description was the former generic expression used to describe the Islamic movement in the country. In lieu of such a definition, the new strategic paper has introduced a technical term which refers to the threat posed by ‘radical organisations which exploit religion’, and which are essentially dealt with in accordance with Turkey’s penal law. In short, the new strategic document represents a fundamental revision of the concept of Turkey’s national security, both internal and external. It further puts an end to the concepts of national security that were linked to the Cold War or to the political hegemony of a small secular Kemalist group.

Expectations of Erdoğan’s political future

Given the success achieved by Erdoğan and his supporters in the battle relating to the largest chunk of constitutional amendments, it is now certain that the next government which will emerge out of the parliamentary elections scheduled for the summer of 2011 will take up the task of drafting a completely new constitution.

The preponderant view among experts in Turkish affairs is that such a new constitution will encompass the rebuilding of the Turkish republic on new foundations. The restructuring will include transforming Turkey into a presidential republic, similar to the French model, where political authority shall be apportioned between the president of the republic and the head of government.

Such a constitutional development will open up the way for Erdoğan to resign from his position as prime minister one year after winning the next elections, and present his

candidature for president, that is, as soon as the post will become vacant in the summer of 2012. According to the dominant view of experts in Turkish affairs, such a move will guarantee him an enduring role in the political arena for many years to come.