

## Report

# Davutoglu's Departure for the AK Party and Turkey

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**Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan makes a speech during an iftar event in Ankara, Turkey** Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan makes a speech during an iftar event in Ankara, Turkey [Reuters]

## Abstract

Ahmet Davutoglu's exit from power does not mark the end of his political career or influence. This article speculates on the implications of his departure for the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) performance and future leadership development. Davutoglu's almost 21-month stint in power came to an end on May 22, 2016. When Recep Tayyip Erdogan was elected Turkey's president in 2014, Davutoglu was appointed as AKP chairperson and Prime Minister. Did Davutoglu actually resign? Or was he removed from office? The article argues that though his exit from power has been officially represented as a resignation, Davutoglu's speeches and the way this resignation has occurred suggest a different interpretation. That is, the article argues, Davutoglu's departure was more a dismissal than a wilful resignation. For the time being, however, this resignation does not mean the end of Davutoglu's political career. Instead, Davutoglu seems to be positioning himself as an alternative leader from within the AKP. Nevertheless, his resignation has provided President Erdogan with a new opportunity to redesign the party and cabinet in his own image. As a result, President Erdogan's grip over both party and cabinet is firmer now than was the case during Davutoglu's premiership. The article will discuss the following two interconnected issues: 1) the extent to which Davutoglu may emerge as an alternative leader from within the AKP; 2) the AKP's political priorities and projections, how the AKP may adopt a more nationalist-developmental political policy. It must be noted that on foreign policy, Turkey's recalibration is set to continue. This recalibration had already begun during Davutoglu's premiership.

## Introduction(1)

It is no longer sufficient to describe the nature of political developments in Turkey as "unu-sual". The aborted coup of July 15, 2016 says it all. Moreover, even before the

coup, the ruling AKP has of late taken two measures that illustrate this state of affairs. The Islamist party changed its chairman along with a major reshuffle of the composition of the party's main decision-making bodies. Moreover, the new party chairman, who automatically became the new premier, has put in place a new government with significant changes to the cabinet. All this has happened since late May 2016, in a very short period of time and with very little fuss.

A successful and well-liked prime minister (Ahmet Davutoglu), who received around 49.5 percent electoral support as recently as November 1, 2015, was forced to leave his post. No convincing reason for his departure has yet been given.<sup>(2)</sup> The ex-prime minister, Davutoglu, registered his displeasure with his forced removal from party chairmanship and premiership, by stating that his departure was not his own choice.<sup>(3)</sup> The event caused a fair amount of discussion among the general public. Nonetheless, Davutoglu's departure occurred relatively smoothly and did not cause any major upheavals within the AKP. The 15th of July coup may be considered as a form of upheaval. However, Davutoglu's departure and the coup are not related in any shape or form. Former transportation minister -- and President Erdogan's long-time friend -- Binali Yildirim acquired both positions vacated by Davutoglu with widespread endorsement by the AKP's Second Extraordinary Congress. These factors in themselves were unique. During all these processes, President Erdogan remained the ultimate decision-maker.

### **Davutoglu: The Alternative from Within?**

Davutoglu has repeatedly stressed that the fact that he is leaving the premiership does not mean the end of his political career. On the contrary, he has pledged to continue his political journey.<sup>(4)</sup> His style and statements indicate that he is determined to keep a good rapport with the AKP social base. To this end, he will try to distinguish himself through a unique political style and standing for himself among the party's top leadership and elite. In other words, he aims to represent a different political voice to those that have been in place in recent years. In doing this, Davutoglu will remain under the political umbrella of the AKP. This gives a scenario of his quest for an alternative from within.

How likely the above scenario is? How will Turkey's electorate see Davutoglu again in the political spotlight? The answers to these questions will be contingent upon how Turkey's politics evolves from now onwards. If President Erdogan succeeds in his ambition of changing Turkey's political system from a parliamentary system to an executive presidency, it is unlikely that there will be a search for a new voice or a new style of politics within the AKP, particularly in the short to mid-term. But if the AKP fails in its attempt to change the political system, then it is possible that such a search might occur.

Before trying to project future scenarios, there are much more pressing issues at hand. What does this recent reshuffle mean for the AKP? Looking at the recent reshuffling of the cabinet and AKP's executive bodies, what kind of a political design does President Erdogan seem to be putting in place?

The AKP was, from the time of its foundation, more than a party. It was a movement that also encompassed a political party.<sup>(5)</sup> One of the reasons that the separation between these two was not very obvious previously was related to the fact that Erdogan was both the leader of the party and the movement. But once Erdogan was elected president of Turkey and became constitutionally obliged to sever his ties to any political party, the difference between the two came to the fore. Davutoglu became the chairman of the party and the prime minister, but Erdogan remained the uncontested leader figure for the larger conservative-Islamic social base in Turkey. There emerged two power centres: one of them was legal/constitutional represented by Davutoglu, the other one was sociological/political represented by Erdogan. Erdogan was not willing to give up on the sociological-political leadership of the AKP's social base and political cadres; and Davutoglu was no less adamant when it comes to forsaking the party's legal and constitutional authority.

The challenge was how to manage this difficult situation while keeping the AKP's political coherence, and sustain its public support. It seems that the AK Party and President Erdogan arrived at the following conclusions during the transition of the party leadership from him to Davutoglu. First, a powerful prime minister is necessary for sustaining the AKP's public support and electoral success. Despite coming from the same political tradition, a powerful prime minister would naturally have his own political convictions and vision. Second, the party needed to make sure this difference in style and politics would not culminate in the de facto fragmentation of the party, and larger conservative-Islamic segment of the society. One can plausibly argue that Davutoglu has strived hard to succeed on both accounts. He represented a new voice, with his own aura, politics and political style, but he also strived to make sure that this difference in style and politics would not cause any rupture within the party. With the benefit of hindsight, it seems that he succeeded on the latter point more at the level of the party's social base than among its cadres and leadership.

These two factors have helped Davutoglu to be regarded as genuine chairman of the party and prime minister of the country by many. The party's social base seems to have embraced him; his approval rate was high. On the main political issues, such as the question of changing of Turkey's political system, he supported the changing of the system, and broadly speaking he remained on the same page as President Erdogan on other major political issues. However, his support was not unconditional. It seems that

President Erdogan and a segment of the AK Party's elite regarded this conditionality, coupled with Davutoglu's high approval rate, as a growing divergence of political visions, which could potentially institutionalize itself within the party. This reading appears to have played the primary role in the removal of Davutoglu from the party's chairmanship and, by extension, the premiership.

After the Davutoglu's resignation, the AKP and President Erdogan seem to have changed tack. The former formula of 'powerful president and powerful prime minister' has been re-placed by a new one of 'powerful president and technocratic prime minister'.<sup>(6)</sup> The new Prime Minister, Binali Yildirim, will be a more loyal, hence politically less-threatening, and technocratic premier who will most likely leave all the important domestic and foreign poli-cy issues to Erdogan. Besides this personal level commitment, Erdogan has also redesigned the party's most powerful internal bodies and put in place a new cabinet which will give him structural control over the party and the cabinet.<sup>(7)</sup> These factors will create a founda-tion for the exercise of de-facto presidential/semi-presidential system in Turkey, in the case where the government fails to change the political system constitutionally.

### **Separation of the party and cabinet portfolios**

One of the important developments that took place in the aftermath of the recent redesign of party and cabinet was the separation of the party and cabinet portfolios. Previously, most, if not all, of the cabinet members occupied seats at the party's central Executive and Decision-Making Board (MKYK). But this has changed during the recent reshuffle of the party's powerful bodies. For instance, out of 26 members of the cabinet (barring the prime minis-ter), only five members occupied a place on the MKYK board.<sup>(8)</sup> This stands in stark con-trast to previous governments and MKYK compositions. Another feature of this new MKYK is that it is made up of relatively young, lesser-known names, most of whom owe their political career to Erdogan. Relatively few of them can claim a political history prior to the AKP. It is not only that Erdogan has opened up political opportunities for them: they also regard that the more political power Erdogan acquires and continues to exercise, the better career prospects they are likely to have. This reality, irrespective of his position, gives Erdogan ultimate authority over the party.

On the other hand, the composition of the cabinet that has been announced on May 24 has defied expectations. It is an experienced and relatively high-profile cabinet.<sup>(9)</sup> Yet, it is clearly a technocratic cabinet aimed at service-delivery.<sup>(10)</sup> While a relatively young and loyal party leadership ensures Erdogan's complete grip over the party, a technocratic and high profile cabinet is aimed at sustaining public support for the AKP.

## Ideology and Vision versus Electoral Success

Given that Davutoglu was a key figure in the AKP's ideological leaning and political vision, particularly on foreign policy, Davutoglu's departure should not be solely examined within the transition of power terminology. When Davutoglu's name was announced to become the AKP's new chairman, hence Turkey's new premier in August 2014, a well-known pro-Islamic academic put the significance of this decision in the following terms: "a mild and inclusive civilisation discourse is required to prompt the human capital of all segments of social life. The key point is the institutionalisation of Erdogan's policies through active reconciliation."<sup>(11)</sup> Davutoglu's civilisational discourse<sup>(12)</sup> has had an important impact on the shaping of the AKP's political vision.<sup>(13)</sup>

His departure therefore implies some consequences for the AKP's political vision. Generally speaking, all political parties gain their legitimacy from the following criteria: their political vision, ideology and political performance. The AKP, for the most part, derived its legitimacy both from its electoral successes and its vision for reimagining Turkey. For different groups this meant different things. For instance, while the Kurds saw this vision as the enhancement of their cultural-political rights, a religious person interpreted this as the extending the boundaries of religious freedoms). For a long time, the AKP has delivered on both accounts. It has performed successfully in each successive election while satisfying the aspirations of its political base. This base was made up of diverse socio-political constituencies with different socio-political demands and aspirations.

However, in recent years, the AKP's electoral success has overshadowed its political vision as its primary legitimating factor among the broad socio-political base that it encompasses. The dramatic reduction in terms of the number of high profile political figures who embody the AKP's previous political vision in the party's governing bodies and the increase in the technocratic nature of the cabinet both illustrate this trend. To put it succinctly, electoral success, more than political vision/narrative, seems to have become the main allure of the AKP for its supporters.

The advantage of the AKP is that its base is dynamic and strives for socio-economic advancement. Meanwhile, opposition parties are moribund and cannot convince this base that they will better serve their desire for socio-economic progress. In this picture, the figure of Erdogan symbolises the embodiment of their socio-economic progress.<sup>(14)</sup> They see the role of Erdogan as vital in the continuation of this trend. But the support from this base is not unconditional. The AKP has a significant chunk of voters who decide the colour of their votes based on performance. One can arguably contend that this performance-oriented base amounts to 20-25 percent of the AKP's constituency. The fluctuation of the AK Party's votes (from approximately 40.7 to 49.5 percent in the June

7 and November 1, 2015 elections respectively) and the level of support (around 40 percent) that polling firms find for the change of the political system more or less put forward the general size of this base.(15) This base demands explanations and expects persuasive arguments from the political leadership that it is supporting. The rationale behind the departure of Davutoglu is and will be questioned particularly by the party's performance-oriented/critical base. The AKP in one way or another needs to satisfy them through its policies and discourse.

### **Nationalist-developmental turn**

Political parlance and recent policy undertakings demonstrate that the government will adopt a more nationalist-developmental political stance in the upcoming period. There is no doubt that the crumbling of the peace process, the fight with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and the expectation of garnering support from the nationalist segment either within parliament or at the societal level in the party's attempt to change Turkey's political system from a parliamentary system to an executive presidency either within the parliament or through a referendum have all contributed to this nationalist turn.(16) This turn will be particularly ill-received by the Kurds. The PKK strategy of urban warfare was disapproved of by most Kurds, who did not join in or support it. But the only alternative to the PKK and broadly speaking Kurdish politics in the Kurdish majority region is the governing AKP. The AKP's nationalist turn stifles these disillusioned Kurds turning away from Kurdish politics and seeking political representation through the AKP. This further alienates them from Turkey's political system, as one of the parties that they vote for reduces itself to an auxiliary of the PKK, while the other is in the midst of a nationalist turn.

### **Continuity in foreign policy**

Davutoglu was a colossal figure in terms of redirecting Turkish foreign policy. But he was not alone in thinking of Turkey seizing a grand role in world affairs.(17) In fact, an ambitious foreign policy agenda with a grand role for Turkey has been one of the hallmarks of political Islam's vision in the country. Turkish foreign policy was by no means solely the product of Davutoglu's vision. President Erdogan was a firm believer in and supporter of most of Davutoglu's foreign policy vision and undertakings. Turkey's foreign policy has and will continue to experience changes and recalibration, but this has little to do with Davutoglu's departure. Instead it is more the result of dramatic contextual and structural changes in the regional/international political landscape.

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