

# Turkey: The Year of Living Dangerously

Soli Ozel

In many ways, 2007 was a threshold year for Turkey and Turkish democracy. The country faced the challenge of deciding its political future as well as resolving its foundational identity problems. From the beginning, most political observers knew that the political climate and developments of the year would be shaped by the dual elections, first for the Presidency and then for the Parliament. Indeed, as will be seen below, the political developments of the year were determined by the struggles related to the elections.

Under the spotlights and the intense scrutiny of the international press corps, Turkish democracy passed its “maturity” test in 2007. The massive shift of power from established elites to rising, mostly provincial elites and their allies represented by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) that began in 2002 continued. On civil-military relations, the balance shifted in favour of civilian politicians, but a new accommodation between the military and the AKP, invisible to the more superficial observers of the Turkish political scene, also began to take shape. One of the main fault lines of Turkish social and political order, that of secularism, took centre stage in massive demonstrations and defined the tenor of the political struggles that shaped the parliamentary and presidential elections (originally scheduled for late April for the Presidency and 4 November for the Parliament).

The democratisation impulses of the society brought forth the demands of the Kurds, the Alevis (a minority Muslim sect with Anatolian origins) and others for participation and power sharing. Another democratising dynamic triggered by rapid urbanisation and globalist transformation and guided by a xenophobic nationalism similarly marked the year. In instances that showcased what sociologist Michael Mann calls the “dark side of democracy”, the intolerant and authoritarian conservatism of Turkish society manifested itself. Reflecting Turkey’s many paradoxes, Turkey’s hitherto modernising secular elites contributed more to this trend than the newly emerging would-be modernisers who are rooted in the tradition of political Islam.

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## **Nationalism and its discontents**

Although as the year unfolded the ruling AKP had to confront the military establishment and then went on to win the general elections on a platform of democracy, its democratisation program had run out of steam long before the year began. The final touch came when the European Union suspended 8 out of 35 negotiating chapters and effectively put the process on hold in its summit of 12-13 December 2006. Technical work still continues though and two minor chapters were opened for negotiations in late December 2007.

Such a drifting apart in the relations was what the nay-sayers in the EU and Eurobashers in Turkey passionately wanted. Just as anti-Turkish sentiment in EU member countries was on the rise, so was a rampant, xenophobic, anti-Western nationalism in Turkey. Taking advantage of the wider public's disillusionment with the unfair way the EU was perceived to be treating Turkey, opposition parties fanned the flames of nationalist passions. AKP too decided to cater to the nationalist sentiment. Evidently the party's higher echelons decided that in an electoral year, to continue with their reformist and liberalising agenda would be a losing course of action.

In the meantime, of course, and as a result of this rising nationalism, Turkey was shaken by successive court cases brought against outspoken intellectuals. These cases were all related to Article 301 of the penal code which criminalises offences against Turkishness. Turkey's Nobel Laureate in literature, Orhan Pamuk, was among those who were tried and for good measure assaulted in the court by self-proclaimed honour guards of national pride.

The AKP government did close to nothing to tame and contain these movements. Indeed, it neither changed nor rescinded the notorious 301. Arguably, as an indirect result of such a climate jointly created by political classes, old elites and a susceptible, offended and fearful population, a prominent, outspoken Armenian journalist Hrant Dink was murdered on 19 January (after having been convicted under 301; a verdict that he appealed, but which, if upheld, would have forced him to leave the country<sup>1</sup>). Dink's murder, as it transpired later, was premeditated and the juvenile killer and his associates received support from officials in security forces. The authorities tried to cover up much of the evidence. The court case that opened in early July had all the marks of an attempt to delay, if not deny, justice.

## **The trophy that was the Presidency**

After a grossly mismanaged and abrasive nomination process, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan nominated his close colleague, former prime minister

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<sup>1</sup>Incidentally, Pamuk, who was ultimately acquitted, left Istanbul for New York in the wake of the murder of Hrant Dink.

and at the time Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül as AKP's presidential candidate in late April. According to unconfirmed reports, the PM promised to nominate a figure acceptable to the military establishment but reneged at the last moment. It appeared that Erdogan was forced to take this step by the radical speaker of the Parliament Bülent Arinç. Arinç, who is a divisive figure associated with the more conservative segment of the party, suggested that he would go for the top office if Erdogan or Gül did not. With its overwhelming majority in Parliament, the AKP was perfectly situated to elect whomever it wanted to the post. It would then have controlled all three major positions in the institutional structure.

The nomination set off a series of reactions. It crystallised the intensity of the aversion the secular establishment and particularly the military had for the ruling AKP. The fierce debate underscored the symbolic significance of the Presidency in Turkey's domestic balance of power. The fact that Mrs. Gül wears the headscarf was seen by articulate circles as an assault on the Republic's sacrosanct principle of secularism. Thus, for both sides the crisis was about something much deeper than the mere choice of the head of state.

Those Turks who were still awake around 11:30 on the night of 27 April had to gulp when the news broke. A harsh statement, in fact an ultimatum, was posted on the website of the Turkish General Staff. The hour at which the statement was posted was not the only curious thing. The Turkish Parliament had just completed the first round of voting to elect a new president. And a petition by the opposition concerning how big a quorum was needed (184 or 367) to hold the election had already been submitted to the Constitutional Court.

The statement emphasized the fact that "the Turkish Armed Forces are a party in those arguments (about secularism) and absolute defender of secularism". It identified a number of instances that exemplified in its judgment a relentless assault on principles of secularism. There was no doubt that the addressee of the ultimatum was the AKP government. The text also echoed the Chief of Staff's earlier comment during a press conference that the President to be elected must be committed to republican principles "not just in words but also in deed". Obviously, the request for a similar commitment to the principles of liberal democracy was wanting. This blatant and aggressive intervention in the democratic process concluded with a barely disguised threat that a military coup was not ruled out as an option to safeguard the Republic's sacrosanct principle of secularism. The next day, the government issued its own, firm statement reminding the military that the civilian government was the supreme political authority in the land and that it was as militantly a defender of republican principles.

The crisis had been long in the waiting. The Turkish President obviously represents the state but is not a mere figurehead. Although he cannot be held accountable for his actions and decisions, save in case of treason, he can preside over the cabinet when he so wishes. He has wide-ranging powers. He is the

commander in chief in times of peace. The Presidency has enormous symbolic political significance since it is the position the founder of the Republic, Kemal Atatürk, held. In a general sense, the Presidency represents the power of the civilian and bureaucratic elites over the civilian political class. The current Constitution of Turkey was written by and for Turkey's generals when they were ruling the country in the early 1980s. The Presidency in the system they devised was meant to represent the secularist state elite's interests and prerogatives *vis-à-vis* the elected government. That was where the *raison d'état* resided.

The rising tension over the presidential elections fuelled a frenzy among Westernised middle classes and exacerbated the polarisation along the secularism fault line. Encouraged by distinctively secularist NGOs, many Turks took to the streets in massive demonstrations, first in Ankara then in Istanbul, Izmir and other cities to manifest their commitment to a secular Republic. The more impressive rallies in Istanbul and Izmir may have drawn as many as a million citizens, more than half of whom were women. They came in the wake of the ultimatum and in this context it was heart-warming to see signs that said "neither the *shari'a* nor a military coup".

In some sense, the ultimatum itself was a sign of weakness on the part of the military, which no longer had the power to determine the outcome of political processes short of putting an end to democratic rule, an option they no longer have in the existing international set-up. In fact, the EU as well as the US administration, albeit with a delay of four days, took a stance against the intervention. In the process, the military embarrassed many Turks who believed that the days of military *diktats* were long gone.

The Constitutional Court, with the military ultimatum hanging over its head, decided that a quorum of 367 was necessary to hold the elections for president. Paradoxically, the Court's decision provided a way to avert the deepening of the crisis. It gave all parties a face-saving formula to extricate themselves from this dangerous impasse. Indeed, the government called early general elections and left it to the new Parliament to elect the new President. The real crisis though was that of the 1982 Constitution and the system it had created, which is an impediment to a fuller democracy. So Turkey's political future was taken to the arbitration of the electorate whose verdict was nothing short of a catastrophic defeat for the military and its allies.

### **The cascade or hope trumps fear**

Rare are the moments in a democratic country's history when a sitting government increases its level of support as substantially as AKP did on 22 July. Such moments can be defining as they can correspond to a major realignment in the political order. Alternatively, they can puncture it. In this light, the elections of 22 July in

Turkey ought to be considered as the consolidation of a major electoral realignment whose agent is the AKP.

The party is a coalition of disparate social forces whose values, ideologies and cultural characteristics are not necessarily the same. Yet, a combination of interests, aspirations and new values brings them together to frame the politics of a transforming society, as does opposition to the existing distribution of power and privilege. In short, what is being witnessed is the old structure giving way to a new one with a spectacular power shift.

One must therefore look at the societal forces the AKP mobilises and represents. The AKP originated in 2001 from Turkey's Islamist movement, defined by anti-Westernism, anti-secularism, xenophobia and an anti-market economic program. Younger dissenters started it after a generational and ideological break from the founding fathers following the military's ousting of Islamists from power in 1997. Responding to Turkey's changing demographics and economic geography, as well as the democratic aspirations of the public, the party positioned itself as pro-market and pro-European. In 2002, it ran on a platform of democratisation, integration with the world economy and openness and won. Organised as an extraordinarily efficient political machine with its hand constantly on the pulse of its constituents and sensitive to the needs of the general public, the AKP became a formidable force. It received much support from the rising provincial entrepreneurial classes that are integrated into the global economy but are socially and culturally more conservative than existing elites.

At the same time, it gained the backing of poorer segments of the population in metropolitan centres through diligent social and organisational work and municipal services. A cursory look at AKP's socially-oriented policies, such as more accessible health care, free distribution of school books, increased grants for students, housing credits for lower middle classes and the poor, explains its appeal to these classes. The AKP's unfettered market orientation endeared it to the existing financial and economic elites, even though they were concerned about the incompatibility of AKP's conservatism with their own lifestyles.

In addition to these, AKP's promise of a more liberal and democratic political order appealed to those segments of Turkey's secular population that were increasingly disenchanted with and alienated from the authoritarianism of the ruling elites. Their support for AKP, despite their disillusionment with the party's recent performance on political reform, proved to be critical, especially in the period after the military's memorandum during the presidential election process.

Finally, the AKP managed to appeal through religion and careful political manoeuvring to the Kurdish population of Turkey's troubled southeast. Hence, the mosaic of candidate profiles from old leftists to Alevis, from Kurds to thoroughly modern and unveiled women among AKP deputies as the party claimed the centre of Turkish politics.

As a result, the AKP received almost equal support from across the country. It was the only party whose support was not confined to a specific region or even a specific social class. Notably, its victory over Kurdish nationalists in many of Turkey's predominantly Kurdish provinces provided it with a mandate and an opportunity to launch a new democratic opening to deal with the Kurdish problem while fighting separatist terrorism – a fact the full significance of which would be appreciated much better towards the end of the year when Turkey finally undertook military operations against the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party, which engages in terrorist activities against civilian as well as military targets and is located in northern Iraq), while holding the promise of substantive reforms for the resolution of Turkey's Kurdish problem.

The traditional centre-right was wiped out and unquestionably replaced by the AKP. Support for the sclerotic Republican People's Party (CHP), the founding party of the Republic that allied itself with the military and waged a campaign based on fear over the fate of Turkish secularism, remained stagnant. The voters refused to support the CHP's project of maintaining a *status quo* that privileged non-elected officials over elected representatives and that fostered xenophobia.

The rising tide of nationalism caused by both domestic and international factors brought the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) back to Parliament after an occasionally gruesome campaign. Yet, the results also indicated that this rising tide of nationalism and the poisonous nationalist discourse that accompanied it had limited appeal in the electoral context. Last but not least, a large contingent of independent candidates made it to Parliament. Twenty of them were supported by the Kurdish nationalist Democratic Society Party (DTP). The representation of Kurdish nationalists, affiliated with the PKK inside the Parliament, raised hopes for a political settlement of the Kurdish issue. It transpired by the end of the year though that these hopes were misplaced. The military expressed their disdain for the presence of the DTP in Parliament on many occasions. The judiciary and its vigilant prosecutors went full steam to bring cases of sedition and separatism against the party, demanding that it be closed down. More importantly, the DTP itself, or most of its leading figures were unable or unwilling to take their distance from the PKK, condemn terrorism and help build a political platform in a context of exacerbating state-PKK violence. To their credit, the prime minister and his government stood firm in opposing the closing of the party and favouring the representation of the Kurdish nationalists in Parliament.

### ***Pas de deux on the PKK***

Upon the victory of the AKP, many outside observers suspected or predicted a military intervention. Although there is no doubt that the military, as the bastion of the secular establishment, did not like the verdict of the electorate, a military coup under the current conditions is out of the question. At the end of the day,

the Turkish military is always concerned with legitimacy. Trying to overthrow a party which has just received the support of half the electorate would not be accepted by either the Turkish people or the international community. One should also keep in mind that the relation between the military and the AKP is more complicated than first meets the eye. During its years in power, the AKP did indeed take steps to restrict the military's political space. But it also bent over backwards to secure the military's privileged status in the political structure of the country and protect its unaccountability and backed down on notably divisive issues such as the veil and the status of religious schools (*imam hatip* schools).

In May, during the political crisis, Erdogan and Chief of Staff General Büyükanıt met *tête à tête*. The meeting, whose content was not leaked by either side, lasted for over two hours and was little noticed outside Turkey. It was widely assumed that the two protagonists came to an agreement on fundamental matters pertaining to the nature of the Republican regime, save the headscarf issue. Indeed the protection given by the government to the military in the handling of a court case against two non-commissioned officers who were caught red-handed after they bombed a bookstore in the town of Semdinli is considered evidence of this fundamental agreement on the rules of the game.

Most observers expected Erdogan to follow a conciliatory and consensus-seeking path for the Presidency just as his magnanimous victory speech suggested. Yet, in a surprise move, which the Prime Minister did not truly endorse but felt compelled to live with, Gül made his desire to be elected President known. After that, the party united behind him and spent an inordinate amount of energy and political capital to secure the election. Arguably, their militancy in electing Gül lost them the trust of many who are not their natural constituents and contributed to the continuation of the polarisation over secularism.

Paradoxically, AKP-military relations took a decisive turn for the better in autumn as PKK attacks escalated. There had been several incidents of PKK terrorism in late spring and early summer during Turkey's election season, which led the Chief of Staff to call for a military operation in northern Iraq. These subsided in July, but after a lull the PKK hit in early October, killing 13 soldiers in the town of Sirnak. The outrage generated by this incident put much pressure on the government to respond harshly. Tensions rose and the military and the opposition used strong language in favour of an incursion across the border. This had also been the case earlier in the spring and some commentators saw the agitation as part of a campaign to brand Erdogan's government as "being soft on terrorism". Indeed, given its strong support among Turkey's Kurds, the government was unwilling to use the military option against the PKK (in the arcane politics of Turkey many observers believe that the military did not want a full-scale invasion either, but found this a useful tool to corner the AKP government and throw it off balance). After all, 24 earlier operations, some with

the assistance of Iraqi Kurds, had not put an end to the PKK or its terrorism inside Turkey. The public's rage after the Sirnak incident compelled Erdogan to go to Parliament and ask for the right to send troops across the border when and as he saw fit.

It was widely believed that the passing of the motion and Turkey's clear messages to all concerned parties (the Americans, the Iraqi Kurds and the Iraqi government) that it would retaliate strongly and decisively constituted a fair warning and would be a sufficient deterrent. Therefore, the massive PKK operation with 200 fighters in the early morning hours of 28 October which claimed 12 soldiers' lives and resulted in 8 being taken hostage came as a shock. Although some wondered how the attackers were not detected and why the casualties were so high and thereby questioned the command deficiencies, the predominant reaction was anger and demand for punitive retaliation.

The PKK had lost much of its power over the population of Turkey's predominantly Kurdish southeast. In the parliamentary elections, the candidates from the Kurdish nationalist DTP, close to the PKK, received fewer votes than the AKP in the region. Being weakened politically, the PKK needed to lure the Turkish military to the swamp of northern Iraq and tempt the government to return to the repressive measures of the 1990s. The ploy was transparent to everyone. With this in mind, the Prime Minister managed the crisis impeccably and avoided rash moves. He asked the military to be prepared and went to the United States to meet President Bush. The meeting was widely seen in Turkey as a sign that the Turkish-American rift over the PKK was finally over and, faced with the seriousness of Turkey's resolve, the United States made its strategic preference clear.

On 15 December, less than 48 hours after the EU's Lisbon Treaty was signed and the summit's Presidency conclusions deeply disappointed many Turks or, alternatively, infuriated them, Turkish airplanes attacked PKK hideouts in northern Iraq. The operation, long awaited by the Turkish public could take place because, according to reports, the US had emptied air corridors in northern Iraq. It is also known that, as was agreed between Prime Minister Erdogan and President Bush, on 5 November the Americans had supplied "actionable intelligence". Along with the information provided by the Joint Intelligence Centre, the Turkish military had all the data it needed to undertake a massive aerial attack. This tangible US help for the military operation also means that Turkish-American relations are rebounding from the deep crisis that set upon them when Turkey refused to let the US open a northern front in Iraq in March 2003.

The primary goal of the attack was to demoralise the PKK by highlighting two significant changes. One was the US decision to act on President Bush's declaration that "the PKK is the enemy of the United States" and squarely side with Turkey. Turkey also received unprecedented support from the EU for its right to fight terrorism. The Kurdish nationalist party DTP had been warned by the EU to

take their distance from PKK's violence. The other was the Turkish military's operational capabilities in the dead of winter when, in the past, fighting had stopped. The Kurdish regional government (KRG) was either a silent or reluctant party to the operation or it had no choice but to acquiesce – another indication of the shifting balance of interests in the triangular relations between the US, the KRG and Turkey.

The operation came at a time when Erdogan's government was testing waters for a comprehensive reform package on Turkey's long-standing Kurdish issue. It is looking for ways to bring the PKK fighters down from the mountains by offering incentives and perhaps a sort of amnesty in the future. This operation might well provide the political space for the government to take these daring steps about which the military has already expressed its unease.

### **Shaping or inventing a future**

With the monopolisation of power by the AKP, Turkey's politics are in uncharted waters. Many of the givens of the republican era are being questioned. It is quite clear that with Turkey's profound economic and social transformation and changing composition of the population due to massive migration, old political structures are outdated. Old elites, having failed to take the steps needed to adapt to changing circumstances, are exiting. Yet the new political leadership, so adept at municipal government and so pragmatic in its approach to problem solving has yet to offer the country a comprehensive vision of its politics. The absence of such a vision is part of what makes Turkey's Western-oriented middle classes anxious about their own future in an increasingly conservative society.

Turkey today is a political and sociological laboratory. It has integrated its Islamist movement into the mainstream of politics. Representatives of an economically dynamic and socially conservative heartland are moving Turkey forward on a path of reform, liberalisation and democratisation. The republican project of modernisation will be modified as Turkey tries to forge a new synthesis between Islam, capitalism and secular liberal democracy. How that experiment ends and whether or not it is successful will have repercussions that go well beyond Turkey.