

Turkey in 2009: Active Globalisation Outside, Domestic Polarisation Inside

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In the last decade, Turkey has undergone significant changes and transformations experienced and felt in all spheres of life. Turkey's "geopolitical pivot" and regional power role in world politics has become more important with its proactive and multidimensional foreign policy and dynamic economy. Its geopolitical identity as a strong state with the capacity to function as a "geopolitical security hinge" in the intersection of the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasian regions, has been enhanced by its cultural identity as a modern, national formation with democratic parliamentary governance, a secular constitutional structure, and majority Muslim population. As a country undergoing accession negotiations with the European Union, Turkey embraced a foreign policy ranging from contributing to peace and stability in the Middle East to playing an active role in countering terrorism and extremism; from becoming a new energy hub to being one of the architects of "the inter-civilisation dialogue initiative", envisioning a world based on dialogue, tolerance and living together. However, besides the active and multi-dimensional Turkish foreign policy and the global attraction that it has brought, especially in recent years, internal politics has increasingly been subject to societal polarisation, internal impasses and conflictual interactions between the state elite and the government.

2009 was not an extraordinary year in this sense. Like 2008, it was marked by a paradox. On the one hand, Turkey continued to embrace an active foreign policy, together with effective, problem-solving, dialogue-

based neighbourhood diplomacy aimed at bringing stability, democracy and peace to the region. Besides its attempts to play a third party role in the management and resolution of regional conflicts, the country's most important step was the signing of two protocols in October between the governments of Turkey and Armenia, outlining the restoration of bilateral ties and the opening of the shared border. On the other hand, this pro-peace and pro-democracy foreign policy was not a guarantee for internal democratisation. Although there have been initiatives for countrywide democratisation, the attempts, for the time being, remain abortive. The conflictual relations between the military-bureaucratic state elite and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, as well as between the main opposition parties – the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) – exacerbated the already existing societal polarisation. The internal instability was further aggravated by the global economic crisis. This article will illustrate the main events which marked 2009, and which portray Turkey's conflictual internal dynamics, under four major headings: i) the local elections, ii) the democratisation initiatives, iii) the economic crisis and iv) the *Ergenekon* trials.

The Local Elections

In the March 2009 local elections, the first to follow AKP's landslide victory in the 2007 general election, the party reaffirmed its electoral strength gaining 39% of the overall vote. Although, on the face of it, the number of AKP votes fell by around 8%, these two elections cannot be compared directly. Firstly, the voting decisions in the local elections are partly shaped by local policy issues and candidates. Secondly, the 2007 national election was held in extraordinary conditions with quarrels over the presidency,

and a number of serious attempts were undertaken by the military, judiciary, opposition parties, media, and civil society organisations to confront the AKP's mode of governance. The AKP in fact emerged from the 2009 local elections as the largest governing force in more than half of the municipalities in Turkey, while the main opposition parties, the CHP and the MHP, attained respectively 23% and 16% of the votes. Yet what was more significant than the percentages of aggregate votes was their distribution. Although the AKP seemed to have gained more or less a homogenous support from all over the country, its share of the votes in the most populous provinces of the western coastal regions (western Marmara and Aegean regions) decreased. The concomitant increase in the MHP vote in these provinces (which was in line with the steady increase in the aggregate MHP vote) may point to an escalating nationalist and reactionary potential, fed by the deteriorating economic conditions and the conflictual interactions that marked the political arena. As a matter of fact, a number of lynching attempts occurred during 2009 in various western and coastal regions against people affiliated with the Democratic Society Party (DTP) or with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), as well as against ethnic minorities such as Kurds or the Roma population. The scenario that emerged in eastern and south-eastern Turkey is also worth considering. While the AKP continued to gain around a third of the votes from these regions, the DTP also obtained around 30%. The fact that the DTP's nationwide votes amounted to 5.6%, and the votes won by the CHP and the MHP in the region were below 10%, does indeed point to a deepening polarisation.

The Democratisation Initiatives

On the very first day of 2009, a new channel, TRT-6, which broadcasts 24 hours a day in the Kurdish language, was officially launched in Turkey. The President Abdullah Gül and the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan gave the new state television channel interviews for the occasion, in which they applauded multiculturalism over homogeneity. Official recognition of the usage of the Kurdish language in the public sphere was a long-awaited step with regard to the resolution of the Kurdish issue, and has also formed part of the EU's progress reports on Turkey. Although the launch of TRT-6 was

an important move in this respect, official bans and prohibitions of the usage of Kurdish in the public sphere continued to exist.

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At the end of July, the Prime Minister announced that the government was working on steps to resolve the Kurdish issue. The speech that the President gave the following week in the south-eastern city of Bitlis, in which he emphasised that diversity, and not homogeneity, should be valued, marked the beginning of what is called the "Kurdish opening" or "democratic opening." The government has also declared its commitment to move on with democratisation initiatives by extending rights to previously disadvantaged groups, which, besides Kurds, include Alevis, non-Muslim minorities and the Roma. Against the opposition parties' arguments that the democratic opening did not include a tangible plan, the government claimed that its primary aim was to provide a discussion ground, and receive input from political parties and all segments of society. The initiative incited a heated debate both in the political and public arena on the dynamics of the process, as well as on the nature of democracy and citizenship in Turkey, and the fact that such issues were discussed publicly at all was a step of great significance.

In the following months, the Interior Minister Beşir Atalay, as coordinator for the democratic opening process, held meetings with civil society organisations, unions, and intellectuals to discuss the measures that needed to be undertaken to resolve the Kurdish issue. The Prime Minister held a meeting with the DTP leader Ahmet Türk, the first official meeting between the two leaders since the DTP entered Parliament, in order to discuss the process. The leaders of the two main opposition parties, the CHP and the MHP, refused to meet with the Prime Minister on the grounds that the Kurdish initiative was an attempt to divide the country.

One of the most concrete steps taken towards resolving the Kurdish issue through peaceful means was the return to Turkey on October 19 of eight PKK members and 26 people from the Makhmour refugee camp in northern Iraq, as a goodwill gesture. Ironically however, this was also the critical event that precipitated the erosion of support for the “democratic opening.” Their return was cause for victory celebrations from PKK and DTP supporters in various Turkish cities, increasing criticism from the opposition. On November 10, the Parliament opened discussions on the democratic opening, and the government submitted the details of its democratisation initiative. These included: the removal of obstacles to use languages other than Turkish in “social and religious” services; the restoration of former Kurdish names of settlements and geographical places; allowing political campaigns in languages other than Turkish; the establishment of independent bodies to promote and ensure human rights; changes in the structure of the Human Rights Directorate to make it autonomous; a national mechanism to implement the United Nations protocols on the prevention of torture; and an independent body set up to monitor the complaints against the security forces, particularly in regard to human rights violations. However, with the opposition maintaining its unswerving position, the talks proved to be unfruitful.

Three weeks later, the Kurdish initiative was dealt a fatal blow when seven soldiers were killed in an attack in Reşadiye, in Tokat province. Following this incident, on December 11, the Constitutional Court voted to ban the DTP on the grounds that it had links to the PKK, and supported terrorism. 35 people, including a number of former DTP mayors, were detained as a result of the operations against the Kurdish Communities Union (KCK), which allegedly functions as the PKK’s urban arm. Although efforts so far have failed, the government has nonetheless vowed to proceed with the Kurdish initiative as well as other democratisation initiatives. It also continues to organise meetings and workshops with the aim of creating discussion platforms and generating suggestions for new legislation, thereby pursuing its aforementioned objective to extend rights to disadvantaged groups.

The Economic Crisis

After years of strong economic growth, averaging at a rate of 6.9% per annum between 2003 and 2006,

Turkey’s slowing economy went into recession in the last quarter of 2008 with the world economic crisis. As the recession continued into 2009, the effects of the crisis were sharply felt throughout the country, with the relatively more open and prosperous economies of the western coastal regions suffering most due to contracting export markets and declining industrial production.

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The recent global crisis, likened by many experts to the Great Depression of 1929, has two main dimensions; one financial and the other macro-economic. It has caused global recession and unemployment, especially in the more developed northern economies. Although largely unaffected by the global financial crisis, due to the structural reforms taken in the financial sector in the aftermath of the 2001 crisis, Turkey’s real sector was badly hit. The economy in the last quarter of 2008 had a negative growth rate of 6.5%, and it continued to contract. In the first nine months of 2009, it attained a negative growth rate of 8.4%. The contraction of the economy increased unemployment rates. The official unemployment rate reached 16.1% in February 2009. By September it had decreased to 13.4%. Real unemployment rates, however, soared way beyond the official statistics, and in a country without a credible safety net system such as Turkey, such high unemployment can increase society’s instability, reactionism and polarisation.

The Ergenekon Trials

The *Ergenekon* trials were the source of much controversy in Turkey throughout 2008 and 2009. Named after a place from Turkish mythology, *Ergenekon* is an ultra-nationalist, underground umbrella organisation of clandestine groups with links to state institutions, and security and intelligence forces. The organisation first came into the public eye in mid-2007 when a weapons cache discovered by police, led to

an investigation that culminated in an indictment in July 2008. Those arrested were accused of forming a terrorist organisation to overthrow the democratically elected government, by plotting a series of attacks and provoking a military coup. The first court hearings took place in late October of the same year. The trials continued throughout 2009, and in March the court accepted a second indictment, which focused exclusively on the coup attempts, and exposed three such plots (Moonlight, Sparkle, and Glow). In the course of the investigation over a hundred people, including politicians, retired military officers, members of the security forces, businessmen, journalists, academics and mafia members, were detained and arrested. Suspects serving as military officers, who previously enjoyed full immunity from civilian law, could now be put on trial thanks to a law passed in Parliament in June 2009.

Opinions regarding the *Ergenekon* case are widely polarised; while some, including the leader of the main opposition party CHP, argue that the case is primarily aimed at silencing the AKP opposition, others regard the trials as a litmus test for democracy in Turkey. Although issues have arisen regarding the methods used to take suspects into custody and the handling of the detainees, as well as the length and monumental scope of the indictments, over time the case gained two important dimensions: (i) disclosure of the recent coup plots and the ensuing trials for those responsible; and (ii) disclosure of the “deep state” and its formation over the years. The latter has led to the adjudication of unsolved assassinations, political murders and extrajudicial killings, which have left their mark on Turkish history and politics in recent decades.

A number of other coup plots have also been exposed since the third indictment was released in August 2009. Most recently in December 2008, two military personnel, suspected of plotting the assassination of the Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç were arrested, and further investigations have been opened. In January 2010, however, the Constitu-

tional Court declared the law allowing military officials to be tried in civilian courts unconstitutional, which may affect the course of the ongoing investigations.

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The solution to the paradox, active globalisation versus domestic polarisation, which marked 2009, lies in the consolidation of democracy in Turkey. A strong democracy will simultaneously support Turkey’s global activism and bring internal stability, which in turn will create a viable and strong state. Global dynamics and an active multi-dimensional foreign policy alone, cannot pave the way to resolving the political and social polarisation, which has been a major obstacle to people in Turkey living together as a plural and multi-cultural society. However, given the fact that national elections are slated for May 2011 at the latest, it is likely that 2010 will be marked by electoral concerns, and that Turkey will be confronted with the same paradox as in 2009.

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