

Turkish Politics in 2008

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The year 2008 was an extraordinary year in Turkish politics even by local standards, mainly for two reasons. First, the chief public prosecutor of the country demanded the closure of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has been in power since 2002 and has garnered no less than 47% of the national vote in parliamentary elections held in July 2007, for having become the focus of activities against secularism. The Constitutional Court in Turkey had closed down close to thirty political parties, but never a ruling party. The year 2008 was also an extraordinary year because the country witnessed, for the first time ever in its history, the detention and putting on trial of retired and current high-ranking military officers accused of involvement in an underground organization that calls itself *Ergenekon*. *Ergenekon* is an umbrella organization of clandestine groups that were accused by the Istanbul public prosecutors of seeking to overthrow the democratically elected government.

Events leading to the closure case against the government party, which brought the country, in the words of the *Financial Times* editorial on 28 July, to “the brink of a national disaster” began in the spring of 2007, when the AKP government nominated Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül for President, to be elected by the Parliament. An electronic memorandum was posted on the Chief of Staff's website on 27 April, the night of the first round of voting in the Parliament, indicating the military's strong opposition to Gül's election, based chiefly on his wife's wearing of the Islamic headscarf, regarded by the military as a symbol of opposition to secularism.

The next day, the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) applied to the Constitutional Court arguing that a quorum of two-thirds of Parliament members was necessary for the Parliament to continue with the voting, which the AKP lacked. In clear violation of the provisions of the Constitution, which require only one-third present, the Constitutional Court decided in favour of the CHP petition within a few days. The AKP government responded by making the decision to go to early elections in July. The elections resulted in a landslide victory for the AKP, and Gül was duly elected President in August.

The national elections in July 2007 were highly significant for Turkish politics, not only because the AKP increased its share of the national vote from 34 to 47%, which enabled it to continue to run the country single-handedly, but also because it was able to collect the majority of the votes in the Kurdish-majority south-eastern region, where the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has been pursuing an armed insurgency since 1984. In another important result of the national elections of 2007, the Democratic Society Party (DTP), regarded by many as the political wing of the PKK, succeeded in becoming the first pro-Kurdish party to gain representation in the parliament by overcoming the 10% hurdle to win parliamentary seats through candidates running on independent tickets. The year 2008 opened with expectations that the AKP government would use its increased political capital to fulfil its election promises and pursue reforms towards European Union membership, which had stalled due partially to various differences between Ankara and Brussels since the start of accession talks at the end of 2005. In this context, it was expected, particularly by the Europhile segments of society, that the AKP government would pass through Parliament the draft of a new constitution prepared by a group of liberal-minded experts commissioned by Prime Minister Erdogan and amended by the party organs.

The new constitution, the first to be adopted by an elected Parliament, was to replace the one adopted in 1982 during the military regime, which, despite having a third of its provisions amended in the course of EU reforms between 2001-2004, still remained highly authoritarian.

The main opposition parties, both the CHP and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), however, had declared that they would not lend their support to the adoption of the draft constitution. It soon became clear to the AKP leadership that it could not rely on the support of its entire parliamentary group either. The draft constitution was thus put on hold, and the government instead seized on the opportunity created by, or fell into the trap laid by, the MHP, which declared its willingness to back constitutional amendments to lift the headscarf ban for university students that has long been a major point of controversy between state elites led by the military committed to the authoritarian form of secularism and the pro-Muslim AKP government as well as the liberal-minded intelligentsia. The constitutional amendment was adopted by the Parliament in February by nearly four-fifths of Parliament members and all parties in the Parliament except for the CHP, which immediately applied to the Constitutional Court for the abrogation of the amendment on the grounds of it being in violation with the principle of secularism.

In March, the chief prosecutor filed a closure case against the AKP for having become the “focus of activities against the secular nature of the state” with a highly controversial indictment based partially on the constitutional amendments to lift the headscarf ban for university students. The chief prosecutor also demanded the banning from politics for five years of as many as 71 leading members of the AKP, including President Abdullah Gül and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The Constitutional Court abrogated the amendments lifting the headscarf ban in June, once more in violation of the constitutional provisions that entitled the Court to review amendments only on procedural grounds and not in substance. The decision of the Court was criticised in liberal circles as the replacement of democracy with juristocracy. The Court was widely expected to close down the AKP following its decision on the headscarf amendment. However, it failed to reach the qualified majority to ban the party in July. AKP thus narrowly escaped closure when six justices, that is, one short of the qualified majority, voted in favour. Ten of the justices of the Court agreed, how-

ever, that the AKP had indeed become the focus of anti-secular activities, while five of them did not regard the violations severe enough to necessitate closure. The fact that the only member of the Court with a background in the military voted against closure led to speculations that perhaps there was a behind-the-scenes deal between the government and the general, who expected to be appointed Chief of Staff in August. There were also speculations about whether the closure case against the AKP was a response by the *Ergenekon* organization under investigation.

The judicial investigation into the shadowy criminal organization, which named itself the *Ergenekon* after an ultra-nationalistic legend, broadened in 2008. The *Ergenekon* first came to public attention when the police seized a weapons cache in a district of Istanbul in June 2007. Beginning that month, and in at least ten waves of detentions, over a hundred people, including politicians, businessmen, academics, journalists, mafia members, and retired and active members of armed and security forces, were taken into custody, most of them to be arrested. The first indictment against the *Ergenekon* disclosed in July accused the suspects of organizing a terror organization with the purpose of overthrowing the elected government in a coup planned to take place in 2009. Various unidentified political assassinations, such as the murder of a Council of State judge in May 2006 and that of the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in January 2007, are suspected of having links to the *Ergenekon*. The *Ergenekon* trial began in October and was expected to take a long time and involve an increasing number of suspects.

There is broad public debate and controversy over the nature of the *Ergenekon*. Circles led principally by Deniz Baykal, the leader of the main opposition party CHP, who accuse the AKP government of violating the secular principles of the Republic, islamizing Turkish society, and attempting to establish an authoritarian rule, argue that the *Ergenekon* case is based on flimsy evidence and aims primarily to silence opposition to the AKP rule. Others regard the *Ergenekon* case as a vital test for Turkish democracy since it promises to disclose the dark side of Turkish politics, to bring coup plotters before justice, and to shed light on the “deep state,” that is, gangs with links to security and intelligence forces responsible for a large number of extrajudicial killings that have taken place since the nineties, particularly against supporters of PKK. Perhaps the most significant reform in respect to the Kurdish question was the official launch of the state televi-

sion channel broadcasting in Kurdish on 1 January 2009, following the adoption of the law allowing for it and preparations that stretched over the latter half of the year. TV-6 channel broadcasting in Kurdish signified nothing less for Turkey than the official end of the non-recognition of the ethnic identity of nearly a fifth of its population. On 1 January 2009, state television channels also began broadcasting programs on the religious beliefs of the Alevis, in a further step towards the full official recognition of the religion of the largest Muslim minority in the country, estimated to constitute another fifth of the population.

Sporadic fighting between the Turkish security forces and the PKK continued throughout 2008. The Turkish army conducted a winter ground operation against PKK bases in Northern Iraq in February, and the Turkish Air Force pounded the PKK targets in the Qandil mountains. The deadliest attack by the PKK militants against the Turkish army took place in October. The liberal daily *Taraf*, launched at the end of 2007, disclosed a number of documents relating to the *Ergenekon* gang, as well as to the military's attempts at behind-the-scenes manipulation of politics. On 5 October, PKK militants entering Turkey from Iraqi territory attacked a military outpost near the Aktutun border station, killing 15 soldiers and wounding 21 others. *Taraf* published leaked documents that indicated that the attack took place despite prior intelligence on its preparation, and questioned for the first time in the history of Turkish media whether the military was doing its job properly, invoking harsh responses from both the Chief of Staff and the government. Ankara continued in 2008 to pursue the AKP government's foreign policy objectives of improving relations with neighbouring countries and dialogue with all the relevant state and non-state actors in the region with the aim of facilitating peace in the broader region. War over South Ossetia in August between Russia, Turkey's biggest trading partner and supplier of energy, and Georgia, its close ally, placed Ankara in a difficult position, in response to which it put forward the initiative of a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform on the basis of Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) principles.

Perhaps the most significant development in Turkish foreign policy in 2008 was President Abdullah Gül's visit to the Armenian capital of Yerevan to attend, together with his Armenian counterpart, the World Cup match between the two countries' national football teams. "Football diplomacy" further pushed efforts

towards the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries and the opening of borders that have been kept closed by Turkey since 1993 as a consequence of the occupation of Azerbaijani territory by Armenia. In an equally significant foreign policy drive, Ankara intensified the dialogue with the Kurdistan Regional Government, which seems to have enhanced the security cooperation against the PKK between Ankara and the Iraqi Kurdish authorities. During the course of 2008, Ankara facilitated normalization of relations between Israel and Pakistan when the Foreign Ministers of the two countries met for the first time in Istanbul in September. Ankara also continued to facilitate indirect talks between Israel and Syria. Prime Minister Erdogan said he felt betrayed when Israel attacked Gaza on 27 December 2008, just four days after Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's visit to Ankara, during which Israel and Syria came very close to declaring the start of direct talks for a peace treaty. On 29 December, Ankara suspended its role as mediator.

The Turkish economy grew by about 1.5% in 2008, with a rate far below the average of 6.7% between 2003 and 2007, during which long-term foreign direct investments in Turkey rose from 1.8 billion to 21.7 billion and per capita income rose from circa 3,400 to 9,300 dollars. Turkish exports went up between 2003 and 2007 from 47 to 107 billion, while imports soared from 69 to 170 billion. The short-term funds influx into the Turkish economy rose from 8.2 billion in 2002 to 107 billion in 2008, helping cover the yearly current account deficit, which increased from 1.5 billion to 47 billion in the same period.

The world economic crisis has also hit Turkey in the last quarter of 2008, when short-term funds dropped significantly to 59.5 billion in October and the stock market dropped to circa 22,000 points, down from circa 58,000 in October 2007. The unemployment rate is 12% in urban areas, and an estimated three million people were officially unemployed at the end of the year. Analysts predict a negative growth rate for 2009.

The biggest political event in 2009 will be the local elections to be held in March. Surveys so far indicate that the ruling AKP may win as high a share of the national vote in the local elections as in the national elections held in the summer of 2007. The local elections are expected to be a kind of referendum on the AKP rule following the closure case against the party in 2008.