

Political Change in Turkey, With Regard to Future Enlargements of the European Union

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During 2002 and 2003 the European Union made several advancements in the enlargement process. Negotiations were completed with ten of the thirteen candidate countries, and the Convention met and prepared a comprehensive draft constitution for the new Europe. The following phase of the enlargement process will be concerned with the membership of the three remaining candidate countries: Rumania, Bulgaria and Turkey. Negotiations have started with Rumania and Bulgaria. As for Turkey, at the Copenhagen summit of December 2002 the European Union leaders decided that negotiations would start without delay after the summit scheduled for December 2004, provided Turkey were able to meet the criteria, common to all candidate countries, referred to as the Copenhagen criteria.

Turkey signed its association treaty with «Europe» forty years ago in 1963. Ever since the creation of the modern Turkish republic in the 1920s, Turkey's aspirations have been in line with the key elements of the «European Project», although each European country contributes a specific and distinct historical background to this project. The modern and secular Turkish Republic is a new state that emerged in the progress of the twentieth century. However, it is also the heir to the Ottoman

Empire, which itself in many ways was the heir of the Eastern Roman Empire. Istanbul, now the industrial, cultural and financial centre of modern Turkey, has been, throughout much of its history, the leading city of South-Eastern Europe. The current enlargement process of the European Union is often presented as a re-unification of Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain, and Turkey brings a further very important Mediterranean and historical dimension to this reunification, with roots that go back many centuries.

In Turkey, the last two years have been marked by rapid and profound political changes. In the general elections of November 2002, the old multiparty political structure was swept away and replaced by a formation that resembles a two party structure. The conservative Justice and Development Party, with its roots embedded in political Islam, gained nearly thirty-four percent of the vote and close to two thirds of parliamentary seats, while the social-democratic Republican People's Party gained close to twenty percent of the vote and the remaining one third of seats in Parliament. This rather extreme «magnification» of the popular vote was due to the ten percent minimum vote required for a party to be represented in Parliament by electoral law. Whether these results will lead to a lasting two party system remains to be seen. So far at least, opinion polls suggest that the current structure may continue to work in the future. Much will depend on the results of the municipal elections scheduled for March 2004. The Justice and Development Party has made important propositions to the secular centre right, and contains a centrist liberal wing alongside its more traditionalist ma-

jority. The Republican People's Party, member of the Socialist International and associate member of the Party of European Socialists, is going through the kind of ideological debates the European Left experienced throughout the last two decades, searching for a social-democratic programme appropriate to the new century and the challenges posed by European integration and globalisation. In the specific context of Turkey, the Republican People's Party is also a party that is proud of its republican and nationalist foundations, which it now has to adapt to the realities of an age where the sharing of sovereignty at both regional and global levels has become a requirement for effective public policies. An important part of the political debate also revolves around the exact definition of secularism, which has been a pillar of the Turkish State and which has allowed a degree of progress and modernisation that has not been seen in countries with no separation between «religion and the State». Left-wing politics in Turkey has and continues to be the standard bearer of secularism.

There are more than a dozen other political parties that are active in the country, including the important centre-right True Path party and a party with a strong regional base in the Eastern part of the country that has support among citizens of Kurdish origin.

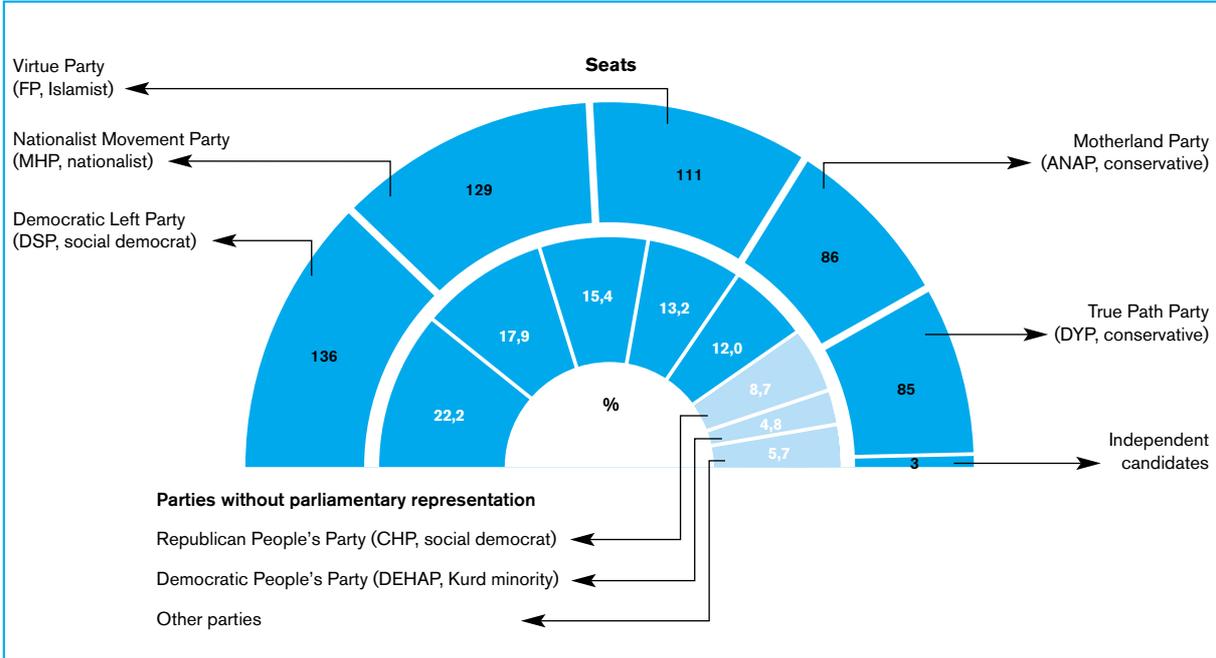
A remarkable development in Turkey's political evolution of over the last eighteen months has been the strong bipartisan support in Parliament for a whole series of laws and reforms that have been designed to satisfy the Copenhagen criteria and accelerate Turkey's integration process into Europe. Most of these laws have been passed with the

unanimous support of the Parliament, and with regard to the country's legal framework, Turkey now satisfies these criteria. What will be of critical importance for 2004 is to see these new laws and reforms fully implemented through the required implementation decrees and regulations. On the economic front, the programme adopted in the spring

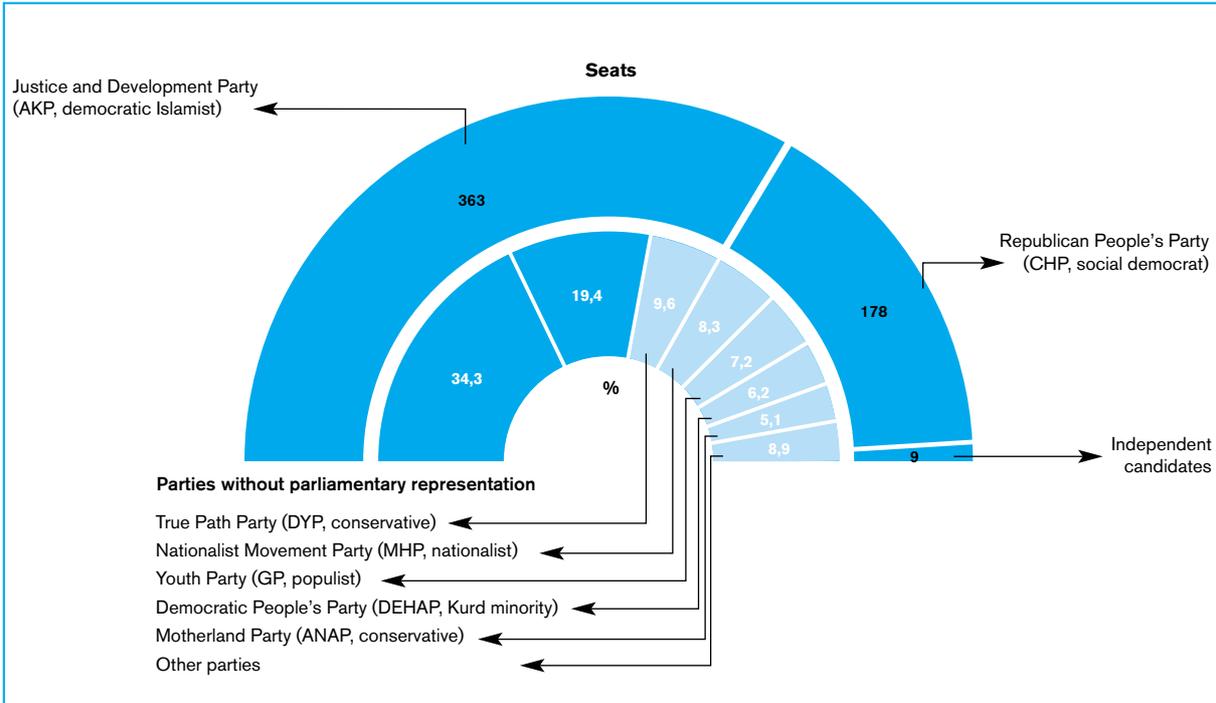
of 2001 after a terrible crisis of confidence has so far been fruitful. Inflation has decreased to levels unprecedented in the past twenty years; debt sustainability worries have largely disappeared and growth has averaged nearly six percent over the last eighteen months. The year of 2004 will be one of momentous decisions and events for Tur-

key and its quest for full membership in the European Union that began many decades ago. Recent political developments in Turkey as well as a better understanding of the issues and opportunities implicated throughout Europe have strengthened its prospects for an acceleration of the process that can lead them to full membership.

GRAPHIC 4 | 1999 Elections



GRAPHIC 5 | 2002 Elections



Source: www.electionworld.org; www.electionguide.org