

Turkish Foreign Policy in the AKP's Third Term

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On July 12, 2011, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* or AKP) claimed victory for a third time in Turkish parliamentary elections since 2002. The AKP received about 49.9 percent of the vote and 326 seats out of the 550 in parliament.¹ Tayyip Erdoğan now has the rare distinction of being a Turkish prime minister in his third consecutive term at the helm of a majority government.

Elated by such an historical victory, Erdoğan's first speech after the election was understandably enthusiastic, but it was also remarkable for what it seemed to signal about the AKP's foreign policy plans for its third term. Erdoğan greeted in his speech, in addition to the citizens of Turkey, the "sister people" of "Baghdad, Cairo, Sarajevo, Baku, Nicosia, and others," who he knew were "eagerly watching Turkey."

Furthermore, Erdoğan declared his party's victory to be a victory of hope for all oppressed peoples, adding that "Sarajevo has won as much as Istanbul; Beirut as much as Izmir; West Bank and Gaza as much as Diyarbakır" and that "the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Balkans had gained as much as Turkey." This surprising number of mentions of previous Ottoman territories in a national election victory speech is certainly noteworthy. What is also interesting is the number of times Europe and the West were mentioned: exactly zero.

Studying Erdoğan's previous victory speeches underlines the significance of this fact. In 2002, Erdoğan did not give such a public speech, but in his post-election remarks, he assured the country that the AKP was committed to pursuing Turkey's candidacy in the European Union and joining "modern civilization" – the goal Atatürk had set for Turkey and which, throughout the twentieth century, had always been interpreted as the West. In 2007, the EU was again the only foreign entity Erdoğan mentioned in his victory speech, with two explicit mentions of Turkey's EU accession

¹ The AKP later gained one more seat when the election commission voided the victory of independent candidate Hatip Dicle. Their majority, however, is still short three of the 330 seats AKP needs to change the constitution.

process and the need for Turkey to develop its democratic standards in order to gain entry.

The 2011 speech also made much of elevating democratic standards, but gone was the EU justification. Erdoğan promised that the AKP would govern in the name of all 74 million citizens of the Republic of Turkey and use its third term to draft a new constitution that would recognize everyone's identity, values, and demands for democracy, freedom, peace, and justice. In doing so, he name checked virtually all Turkey's ethnic constituencies: Turks, Kurds, the Zaza, Arabs, Circassians, the Laza, Georgians, the Roma, Turkmens, the Alevi, Sunnis, and *azınlıklar*.² That non-Turkish ethnic elements would be mentioned by the prime minister in a national speech was groundbreaking and unheard of since the early years of Atatürk's rule when certain Ottoman frames were still in circulation and neither Turkish nationalism nor Kemalism had calcified in its present form. The rest of Erdoğan's speech was also peppered with references to improving Turkish democracy and to his stated desire to make peace with his opponents, to work together to create a stronger, more pluralistic, and more democratic Turkey that plays an active and high-profile role in the region.

In terms of foreign policy aspirations, there is very little subtext to analyze, with Erdoğan making it very clear that Turkey will continue to follow the foreign policy course charted by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in the AKP's second term. That term was marked by an ambitious foreign policy that drifted away from Turkey's traditional partnerships with the West and toward the betterment of relations with regions previously neglected by Turkey, such as the Middle East, North Africa, and Eurasia. During his second term, Turkey became a vocal critic of Israel's actions in Gaza and an increasingly independent negotiator in the Iranian nuclear program issue. Its interest in closer relations with Eurasian, Asian, and MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries were reflected in numerous reciprocal liftings of visa requirements and increased trade agreements. Turkey's total trade with Middle Eastern and Asian countries increased almost tenfold in volume, whereas the EU's share in Turkish trade declined by almost twenty-five percent. All this economic expansion was underwritten by Davutoğlu's "strategic depth" doctrine, which holds that the main principles of Turkish foreign policy are a balance of security and democracy in domestic politics; "zero problems with neighbors;" closer relations with the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Caucasus; complementary policies with the West; and a diplomatic approach that is active in international organizations and peace-building efforts. That Erdoğan intends to continue down this path, which has proven very successful for Turkey, is clear from his victory speech.

This is further verified by the fact that Davutoğlu easily retained his post in the new cabinet and has been following a very busy agenda relatively uninterrupted by the election frenzy. Between the election and the time of writing this memo (less than a month), Davutoğlu had already met with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, traveled to Montenegro for the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECP),

² This means the legally recognized minority communities of Greeks, Armenians, and Jews, whose numbers altogether amount to less than 1% of the current population.

visited northeastern Libya and Benghazi to extend Turkey's official recognition to the Libyan rebels, hosted U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other foreign dignitaries in Istanbul for a summit on Libya, and was planning to go on a Middle East tour that included Syria. He also threatened the European Commissioner for Enlargement that EU-Turkey relations would freeze if the EU did not push the Greek Cypriots to find a solution to the Cyprus issue, as if to relay once more the point that the old Turkey, which was always trying to appease the EU, was long gone.

Many observers before and since the election have underlined the seeming neo-Ottoman aspirations of Turkish foreign policy in recent years. The more simplistic of such analyses attribute to Turkey expansionist and militaristic motives, but at least for the moment such analyses only prove the biases of their authors. Judging by the track record discussed above, rather than military dominance, the AKP government seems to be pursuing economic and cultural influence, perhaps in the manner of Japanese foreign policy in East and Southeast Asia after its post-WWII economic boom.

It is undeniable that Turkey has much going for it at the moment to serve such a grand strategy. Turkey's economy is buoyed by impressive growth rates at a time when the rest of the world, especially Western economies, are suffering. Turkey posted a 13 percent growth rate in the first half of 2011, surpassing even China. Furthermore, at a time most Middle Eastern leaders are facing the ire of their people, Erdoğan is wildly popular both domestically and regionally. A recent survey found him to be the most popular leader in the Middle East, well ahead of the nearest contenders: Ahmadinejad and Hasan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's secretary-general. The push of Turkish soft power is not exclusive to the Middle East either; Turkish soap operas are increasingly consumed in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, further testimony to the growing cultural reach of Turkey.

All this does not mean, however, that nothing will change in Turkish foreign policy in the AKP's third term, or that all is smooth sailing for Turkey and Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman aspirations. Several red flags are already apparent.

Turkey's ability to successfully pursue regional influence is contingent upon two factors: continuation of economic stability and growth and the AKP's ability to deliver on its promise of democracy. Neither, however, is assured. On the economic front, many observers note that economic growth has resulted in dangerous levels of consumer borrowing and spending, which may cause the economy to overheat. It is also uncertain how much longer Turkey will be spared the economic malaise affecting much of Europe and the United States. In the not unlikely event that one or more Western economies default, Turkish markets may be more exposed than the AKP government cares to admit.

However, the possible slowing of its economic boom is the lesser challenge facing Turkey in the near future. The real problem lies in delivering on the promise of a real consolidated Turkish democracy. As much as Erdoğan likes to talk about a more democratic and pluralistic Turkey, in recent years the AKP has been acting increasingly like a status quo party uninterested in reforms that do not favor its own base. For instance, the AKP made no effort to change the national 10 percent threshold a party

needs to surpass in order to gain seats in parliament, forcing the candidates of the Kurdish party, the Peace and Democracy Party (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi or BDP), to run as independents. The impression that the AKP has no interest in recognizing the BDP as a serious partner in solving Turkey's decades-long Kurdish problem was solidified when the election board voided the electoral victory of one of the Kurdish independents, Hatip Dicle, because of his conviction in 2010 of what was essentially a political speech crime. The AKP's claims that the recent election board is an independent body seem insincere in light of the AKP candidate's eagerness to claim Dicle's seat. In protest, the other independent BDP MPs refused to swear the parliamentary oath; at the moment of writing, they remain outside parliament, not good news for the fate of pluralism in future constitutional negotiations. The situation was not helped by the fact that in the second week of July, thirteen Turkish soldiers were killed by the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), the Kurdish insurgency group, undercutting any hope of a calm national debate at the present time. Generally, at the moment, hope for a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish conflict is at its lowest point, as if the democratic gains of the last decade had never been made. The AKP and Erdoğan are much to blame for this outcome, as they amped-up the nationalist rhetoric in the run-up to parliamentary elections in an effort to appeal to voters of the ultra-nationalist party MHP (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi) while simultaneously trying to undercut BDP votes in Kurdish regions through ugly insinuations about the BDP members' lack of religious conviction.

All this does not bode well for the supposed democratic bona fides of the AKP. The Kurdish problem has been around since before the creation of the Turkish republic, with each governing party eventually defaulting to the centralizing, statist, anti-pluralist, and hegemonic worldview first initiated by the Committee of Union and Progress all those years ago. That position always defines Kurds as a secondary element within the polity and assumes that any services or rights are for [Sunni] Turks to give to them. Framed in this manner, the expectation is always that Kurds should be grateful for whatever is given. It is ironic but not surprising that the AKP, which very much started out as the anti-center and anti-assimilation party, has come to embrace such a worldview after holding the reins of power in its own hand. That the AKP is enjoying the kind of power this type of state bestows on its governors is also evident from the fact that it has no problem enforcing the various anti-democratic curbs on speech and organization it once railed against.

The increasingly authoritarian turn of AKP, if sustained, will have serious implications for foreign policy. The more Turkey acts like the old Turkey of the military-bureaucratic elite (albeit with an Islamic flavor), the less likely it will be able to influence the countries of the region. The foreign policy of a more authoritarian AKP would look more like Russia of the last decade rather than Japan of the 1970s, but Turkey has neither the economic nor the military wherewithal to match Russia in such ambitions. More importantly, the regions Turkey would like to bring into its sphere of influence do not have an appetite for such a model – Turkey is increasingly a role model and a trade partner, especially for the Middle East, because it seems to hold out the

promise of reconciling modernity and religion, democracy and development, consumerism and tradition, the West and the East. Without that promise of democracy and pluralism, Turkey will be nothing more than Iran without oil.

To his credit, Erdoğan seems to recognize this to some degree, which is presumably why he made so many references to democracy in his speech. What the AKP and Erdoğan have to understand, however, is that they are no longer the underdogs, and neither necessarily is Turkey. Turkish foreign policy in the AKP's third term will be successful to the extent that the AKP takes seriously the responsibility that comes with power and does not let past resentments justify petty calculations. If Turkey starts throwing its weight around the region without solving its own domestic problems, the excesses of the last years of the Ottoman Empire will be quickly remembered. The AKP can no longer claim to speak for all oppressed peoples; it has to show, beginning with its own domestic policies, that it can speak for oppressed people even when they are not in the AKP's base. That makes finding a peaceful solution to the Kurdish conflict the number one issue for both domestic *and* foreign Turkish policy in the third term of the AKP.