

Why Turkey Will Not Become Italy

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

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Articles & Testimony

While Italy is in a sore state under the weight of its old elites, the CHP's revival will likely prevent Turkey from falling into a similar rut.

Attending an Italian gathering of the Council for the United States and Italy, I was struck by the extent to which Italy reminded me of Turkey before 2002: a country run by an octogenarian and Cold War-era elite, lacking the imagination to reform. Italy is stuck in the past because its elites live there.

Thanks to the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, which has ruled Turkey since 2002, Turkey's traditional secular elites are being forced to rejuvenate themselves -- saving themselves and their country from the fate that has struck Italy.

A case in point is the transformation of Turkey's largest opposition movement, the Republican People's Party, or CHP.

After a decade of stagnating in comparison to the AKP, the CHP now appears to be reborn as Turkey's first truly liberal mass political opposition movement. Since electing a new leader in 2010, the party gained over 3.5 million new voters in the June 12 elections, boosting its support by over one quarter.

Since 2002, the AKP has been the party of change in Turkey, promoting a blend of free markets and social conservatism.

Many Turks pointed to the fact that while Turkey faced conservatism and growing authoritarianism within the ranks of the AKP, the lack of a credible opposition to check the governing party's power posed an even bigger problem. The CHP provided no viable liberal alternative, simply offering the Turks pro-status quo nationalism. While the AKP stood for an agenda of change, albeit toward a more conservative Turkey, the CHP failed to put forth any alternative vision for a 21st-century Turkey.

The choice between the AKP and the CHP was, in fact, a false choice for a democracy that had lost its vigor, much like the dilemma facing Italy today.

Part of the problem lay in the fact that while the AKP mastered grassroots politics, the CHP remained oblivious to such a tactic, ostensibly waiting for the masses to embrace it.

Furthermore, the CHP stuck to the wrong side of Kemalist legacy, turning off many Turks. As an early 20th-century modernizing movement rooted in French positivism, Kemalism envisioned a Turkey at peace with Western values, but resorted to state-led modernization to reach this goal. The old CHP fixated upon the latter part of this legacy, a "we know what is best for you" paternalism that no longer fits Turkey's diverse population.

This is now changing. Kemal Kilicdaroglu is fashioning a new CHP, embracing certain Kemalist values, such as gender equality and individual liberties, while jettisoning its methodology. More importantly, after the AKP dropped the ball on European Union accession, the new CHP picked it up, arguing that EU membership must remain a top foreign policy priority if Turkey is to become a true liberal democracy.

With a record number of women in the new party assembly and a fresh approach to the country's festering Kurdish question (such as their proposal to implement Kurdish language education), the CHP appears to be emerging as a liberal force.

For the first time, the Turks have a credible progressive alternative to the AKP. As a result, Turkey, a unique democracy balancing Islam, secularism and a sense of Western identity, has a chance to address its "yin and yang" problem.

But now, with the AKP having won the elections for a third term, will the liberal version of the CHP continue to thrive? The answer would appear to be yes. After centuries of Westernization, Turkey has millions of would-be liberals who finally have a party with which they can identify.

Turks no longer have a false choice between the AKP's top-down social conservatism and the old CHP's top-down Kemalism. Although seemingly diametrically opposed in values, these two approaches mirrored one another, as each wished to shape society in its own image by imposing its weight on Turkey's diverse population.

Now, Turkey appears to have a second way, a liberal vision enshrined in the new CHP. After shedding its ill-fitting form, secular Turkey is rising out of its own ashes. In short, while Italy is in a sore state under the weight of its old elites, it appears that Turkey will not follow the same path.

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