

Obama to the Rescue

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Mar 16, 2011

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Articles & Testimony

In the absence of a free media in Turkey, the platform offered by the foreign media may become the only one in which the AKP's voice of disagreement with the U.S. can be heard.

As the *Hurriyet Daily News & Economic Review* celebrates its fifth decade and Turkish democracy its sixth, all eyes are on Turkey. Will the country overcome the political warfare between the governing Justice and Development Party, or AKP, and its opponents?

To those who doubt the seriousness of the conflict, a well-informed friend says Turkey's current polarization makes the divide between Blue States and Red States in the United States look like a monochrome affair. Will Turkey's six-decade-old democracy collapse under the weight of its warring factions?

Worry not, for there is a way forward. So long as Turkey has true media freedom, it will democratically pull through the current polarized environment. And fortunately for us all, President Barack Obama has significant leverage in this matter.

The AKP government has a rather positive view of President Obama, even if it takes issue with particular U.S. policies. This change resulted from Obama's April 2009 visit to Turkey, his first overseas trip after coming to power. The AKP has come to view this gesture as a sign of appreciation for the party and its policies.

What is more, the president and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan have a close rapport, with Obama regularly calling Erdogan to exchange views on foreign policy. In recent weeks, for instance, the president has phoned Erdogan at least a dozen times to discuss the events in Libya, Egypt, and elsewhere in Middle East.

Finally, as farfetched as it might sound, the AKP has an emphatic, if factually-incorrect, connection with the president. This bond stems from the fact that, as one Washington-based Turkey analyst has put it, "prominent AKP leaders believe that President Obama is a Muslim." The party leadership also believes that while U.S. government agencies might not like the AKP, the president likes the party and its "religion-based policies."

The appeal of President Obama to the AKP is such that even though the party might dismiss messages coming from various U.S. government branches, it is quite likely to take advice coming directly from the president. Proof of Obama's influence on the AKP leadership can be found in the outcome of last years' crisis over the proposed NATO missile defense shield. Turkish media reported that although the AKP initially objected to the missile shield to be placed under NATO aegis, after the president made it clear to the AKP leadership that the issue was of personal importance for him, the party simply acquiesced.

Economic issues related to the upcoming Turkish elections may also provide the president with considerable leverage vis-a-vis the AKP. Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP government has stayed popular thanks to economic stability. Although the Turkish economy has always been dynamic in nature, up until 2002, Turkey did not experience stable economic growth. The pattern of the Turkish economy was such that growth would always be followed by a downturn, as it happened in the 1993-1994, 1997, 1999, and 2000-2001 economic crisis following a few years of growth, creating a sense of perpetual economic instability.

This has changed under the AKP as Turkey has enjoyed almost a decade of stable growth with no annual downturns, even weathering the 2008 global crisis well. Now, as it prepares for elections, the AKP will be interested in repeating this success. To this end, the party needs to avoid a public row with Washington over its domestic or foreign policies, including the AKP's position on domestic media freedom. A major conflict with the United States could weaken the markets' confidence in the Turkish economy, creating politically damaging economic problems for the AKP in the run-up to the polls. If there was one time when the AKP were to heed calls from Washington, it would be between now and the June elections.

What is in this for President Obama? As Turkey faces elections in June 2011 in a polarized landscape between the AKP and its opponents, Washington can help defuse such tensions by taking action on media freedoms.

What is more, in the absence of a free media, the platform offered by the foreign media may become the only one in which the AKP's voice of disagreement with the U.S. can be heard. At a time when Washington desires Turkish support on a number of issues, ranging from countering Iran's nuclearization to using NATO assets in Libya, the president would do well to use his leverage to ensure greater media freedoms in Turkey. In a more open media environment, the AKP

will be forced to publicly confront divergent views and will also face increasing scrutiny regarding Turkey's frayed relationship with the United States. In this regard, the current window is a rare opportunity for the president's voice to be heard by the AKP.

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