

Here's What Happens to the Eye You Don't Use

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Articles & Testimony

The demise of Turkey's secular parties in the past decade is an example of what happens to an eye one does not use: It stops functioning properly. This is precisely what happened to the secular parties in Turkey. These factions ruled the country until 2002, when the Justice and Development Party (AKP), rooted in Turkey's once-isolated Islamist opposition, came to power. Since then, the AKP has displayed a voracious political appetite, as if to compensate for decades without power. The party has aggressively consolidated its influence at home and mastered grassroots politics.

Meanwhile, liberal, secular, and nationalist political parties have seen only the hazy outline of a powerful AKP, and remain blind to grassroots politics. As they become increasingly lethargic, the AKP grows sharper.

Herein lies the reality of Turkish politics in the run-up to the June 2011 elections: Non-Islamist parties have a chance to compete against the AKP if they can recover their political charm and resume grassroots politicking.

Of course, though necessary, this is not sufficient. Non-Islamist parties face a number of hurdles. Since 2002, the AKP has amassed such influence over Turkish businesses and media that it will be difficult for the non-Islamist forces to build support without a government crackdown.

For instance, independent media outlets receive daily calls from the prime minister's office to adjust their coverage to favor the AKP, lest they face punitive fines. Self-censorship is so rife that outlets now "clean up" their acts without the need for AKP interference. A recent incident involved Oktay Eksi, Turkey's Tom Friedman, who served for three decades as chief columnist of the country's most influential daily, Hurriyet. After writing an unbecoming column about the AKP leaders, Eksi was forced to "resign" when AKP chair and Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened to "fight back." Hurriyet's owner, the Dogan Group, faces a \$3.3 billion tax fine for anti-government activity -- a sum larger than Dogan's net worth; another fine may finish it off. So much for independent media.

The AKP's grip is equally felt by secular, pro-Western businesses, which still form the bulk of the country's Fortune 500 club. Despite their economic power, such businesses fear that if they support non-AKP forces, they will be targeted by selective tax audits, or lose lucrative contracts. In fact, business leaders who support opposition parties are often "linked" to the infamous Ergenekon case, ending up in jail for supporting this alleged coup plot.

Ergenekon provides perhaps the best illustration of the AKP's post-2002 machinations. The AKP has abused this coup allegation to include a wide array of opponents. Such people typically end up in police custody, only to be released a few days later, free yet shaken. Or AKP opponents find that someone has wiretapped their private communications for use on pro-government media broadcasts, often with unsubstantiated coup allegations.

Ergenekon has become an open-ended process of illegal wiretapping, arbitrary detentions, and fantastic coup allegations, all used to create a climate of fear for non-Islamist Turks. In other words, anyone who opposes the AKP can be caught in Ergenekon's intentionally wide net. However, no one caught in this net has yet received a jail term, and it is unlikely that anyone will. After all, Ergenekon is not about prosecuting coup allegations; it is a tool the AKP uses to persecute its opponents. No wonder new opposition movements are not emerging.

Beyond the AKP, the opposition is also to blame. For instance, there is no credible center-right party. Turkey is predominantly a center-right country, in which people believe in free enterprise and conservative values. In the past, secular and pro-Western center-right parties successfully represented this constituency. Every party that ran the country for an extended period between 1946 (when Turkey became a multiparty democracy) and 2002 -- such as the Democrat Party in the 1950s, the Justice Party in the 1960s and 1970s, the Motherland Party and the True Path Party in the 1980s and 1990s -- represented Turkey's center-right.

The problem, however, is that all these parties -- and their successors -- imploded in 2001, when Turkey faced its biggest economic crisis in modern history. Since then, none of these parties has recovered. The AKP now caters to their constituents, and masterfully put the needs of this constituency in its sights. Meanwhile, center-right voters have moved to the Right, adopting many aspects of the AKP's harder social conservatism and Manichean "us (Muslims) versus the West" foreign policy values.

As a result, Turkey's vision is now operating through the strong eye of the AKP. What is more, the AKP has no credible challenger, especially from the Right, where an opposing party would find the most success. Though the Left is a weaker contender for power historically, there is a glimmer of hope there: The main opposition Republican Peoples Party has elected charismatic Kemal Kilicdaroglu, nicknamed Gandhi Kemal, to challenge Erdogan, who has a tough-guy image.

Meanwhile, like a working eye that becomes sharper through use, the AKP has become a refined political machine. Indeed, moderate Turks have an uphill path to the June 2011 polls; they may wish to ask for God's help in finding a pair of glasses.

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