

## Turkey Lost Turkey

Jul 13, 2010



Articles & Testimony

**U**. S. President Barack Obama last week partly blamed the European Union for supposedly driving Turkey away from the West by stalling the country's EU accession. Mr. Obama is confusing cause and effect. The real problem is that the ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) doesn't share the dream of a liberal, Western Turkey.

While I have always supported Ankara's membership bid, it is time to admit that the reason Turkey will not join the EU any time soon is not because of European reservations toward a Muslim country but because of the Turkish government's reservations toward European values.

Things looked much different when Brussels opened membership talks with Ankara in 2005. At the time, the government seemed committed to joining the EU. The AKP, whose predecessor Islamist Welfare Party (Refah) was banned in 1998, emerged in 2001 with an avowedly non-Islamist platform. The party jettisoned Refah's anti-European rhetoric (Refah had dismissed the EU as a "capitalist and Christian club") and instead embraced the accession process.

But despite the AKP's re-branding as pro-Western, it has no strategic view of EU membership. It used the EU accession process only as a tactical ploy to shed its Islamist image, gain Western legitimacy and curb the power of the secular military. Having thus made the AKP palatable for Brussels bureaucrats and liberal Turks alike, the AKP dropped the EU accession process as soon as it was expected to implement, and not just pass, tough reforms. In a public demonstration of its lack of interest in Europe, the AKP declared 2005 the "Africa Year."

As a result, Turkey's reform process did not just stop, it deteriorated. As the government resorted to jailing critical journalists under the pretext that they were planning a coup, the country dropped 20 spots in the Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index. In last year's survey Turkey ranked only 122 out of 175 countries, compared to 102 in 2008. The AKP has used plot allegations -- most infamously in the so-called Ergenekon case -- to target its political opponents in the media, military and academia.

The AKP has gone specifically after the Dogan Yayin Holding, which owns the bulk of the media not already in the hands of pro-government businesses. After Milliyet, a paper owned by Dogan, reported allegations about AKP links to an Islamist charity in Germany, the government last year slapped Dogan with a record \$3.3 billion tax fine, a sum that exceeds the company's worth. Under the AKP, Turkey is becoming more like Russia than Europe.

The Islamist rule has also been a blow to the cause of gender equality. Back in 1994 the percentage of women in executive civil service positions was 15%, according to IRIS, an Ankara-based women's rights group. The number has now gone down to 11%. While 33% of all lawyers in Turkey are women, there is not a single woman among the nine top bureaucrats in the Turkish justice ministry. Contrast this with the large number of female jurists in the country's high courts, where judges are appointed by peers and not by the government. Almost half of the members of the Council of State, Turkey's top administrative court, are women.

But even this refuge of enlightened gender policy might soon come to an end. The AKP has recently pushed constitutional amendments that would enable it to appoint the majority of the judges to the high courts without a confirmation process. Female judges may no longer bother to apply. As Mr. Erdogan put it so delicately on the 2008 World Women's Day, the role of women in Turkish society is not to have a career but "to make at least three babies each."

Given these reform shortcomings, skeptics of Turkey's EU membership, such as French President Nicolas Sarkozy, cannot be simply discarded as prejudiced. The AKP could have responded by adopting a strategic view of EU accession. Swift reforms could have embarrassed Mr. Sarkozy into dropping his objections, lest France be seen as an anti-Muslim country. Instead, the AKP complained about Europe's alleged anti-Turkish resentments.

The AKP then turned its foreign policy attention to the Middle East, engrossing itself in regional conflicts. Herein lies the incongruity between the AKP's activist, run-around-the-world foreign policy and the party's alleged commitment to EU accession: When everything is a priority, nothing is, and no country has ever gotten into the EU without making membership a top foreign policy priority.

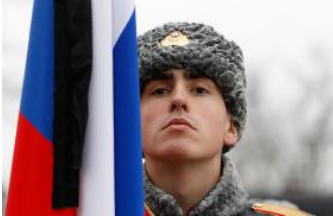
While Turkey has raised eyebrows in the West by aligning itself with regimes in Tehran and Damascus, it has received much applause for supposedly repairing relations with Armenia. But despite the personal involvement of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, there has been no real progress. Ankara signed a protocol to normalize ties with Yerevan but never ratified it. Just like its EU accession policy, the AKP's Armenia opening is more PR than reality.

There is, though, a glimmer of hope. Turkey's EU prospects have looked so bleak not just because of the AKP but also because even the secular opposition lacked the necessary commitment to Europe. However, since the May 22 election of the charismatic and pro-European Kemal Kilicdaroglu as the new leader of the main opposition, the Republican Peoples Party (CHP), things are changing. Mr. Kilicdaroglu has already voiced his commitment to the EU, a refreshing change in Turkish politics, and is courting retired pro-EU Turkish diplomats disappointed with the AKP's foreign policy direction.

When Ataturk established the CHP in the 1920s, his vision was to make Turkey European. In next year's general elections, the CHP will face an uphill battle against the AKP. One thing is sure, though. If Ataturk's dream is ever to come true, Turkey will need a new government.

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