

Turkey's Game Changer?

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Articles & Testimony

The recent resignation of Deniz Baykal, leader of Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), over an alleged sex tape scandal presents a serendipitous window of opportunity for Turkish politics.

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP), rooted in the country's Islamist movement, came to power in 2002, Turkish politics has been mired in two, mutually perpetuating problems: the rise of an authoritarian AKP and the lack of an effective opposition to challenge this trend. Baykal's replacement, Kemal Kilicdaroglu -- a charismatic, moustache-sporting people's man in the mold of AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan -- promises to fix the latter problem. Kilicdaroglu, a liberal, has already said he will take the CHP, the heir to social democratic politics in the country, back to the working and middle classes. If Kilicdaroglu can now also reinvent Kemalism, the founding ideology of modern Turkey and the CHP, making it attractive in the eyes of the Turkish people, he can even challenge the AKP in the forthcoming 2011 polls.

Since 2002, Turkey has been seized by a protracted battle between the AKP and its opponents. So far, secular Turks, represented by the CHP, have been losing. One reason for their failure is the CHP's inability to update Kemalism while coming to terms with religion, and thus to make Kemalism a 21st-century vision for moving Turkey forward. There are signs that Kilicdaroglu might alleviate this problem; the new party assembly he formed includes a record number of women and an imam.

This is crucial. If Kilicdaroglu can move Kemalism forward, Turkey may finally find a proper balance between its secularists and Islamists.

The lesson for Kilicdaroglu is that the AKP's success lies in its forward-looking vision -- though one that envisages reshaping the country along its ultra-conservative social values and a foreign policy that does not axiomatically consider Turkey a member of the transatlantic community. Like it or not, this represents a way forward, and the AKP, therefore, represents change in Turkey.

The CHP has failed to come up with its version of moving Turkey forward, instead merely opposing the AKP. Subsequently, and ironically for a leftist party, the CHP has become the party opposing change -- the party of "no." The implications of the dirty tactics against Baykal aside, the shake-up in the CHP's leadership presents the party with an unprecedented opportunity -- Turkish leaders do not quit politics until they die -- to introduce New Kemalism, a forward vision for a European Turkey.

Kilicdaroglu has already voiced support for EU accession, and the talk in Ankara is that he is wooing prominent liberal, pro-EU Turkish diplomats who feel disgruntled with the AKP's foreign policy to join the CHP. If the CHP becomes the party of change, it can even mold Turkey in the image of leftist parties that took Portugal and Spain into the European Union while transforming and liberalizing their societies.

New Kemalism's aim would be to boost traditional Kemalism's commitment to Turkey's European vocation while reguiding it toward more liberal values. In the early 20th century, Kemal Ataturk wanted Turkey to go West, and that remains Kemalism's goal. Europe, however, has moved even further West since then. Joining this new Europe, the EU of liberal values, has to be New Kemalism's driving mantra.

New Kemalism -- Kemalism 2.0 -- would be updated and recast to preserve the liberal aspects of a Kemalist polity, while jettisoning authoritarianism and anachronistic aspects of traditional Kemalism.

The ideology would assert the separation of religion and government, while becoming tolerant of social conservatism. In this regard, the relationship between the government and religion would be redefined. The state would be equally distant from all faiths. Laws would ensure that religion be kept outside the body politic, while an ombudsman would keep watch on the rights of people who practice Islam, as well as of those who do not -- a necessary institution in a country that is nominally 99.9 percent Muslim.

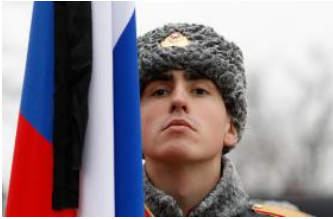
While Kemalism has to evolve, the AKP must in equal measure adjust itself to encompass Turkey's strong Kemalist legacy. Lately, the AKP has dismissed its opponents, adopting the political mantra: Eat your opponent for lunch or else he will eat you for dinner.

This attitude reached a crescendo in May, when the Turkish parliament passed constitutional amendments proposed by the AKP. The changes, due to be voted on in a referendum on September 12, would give the AKP, which already has control over the executive and legislative branches of government, the powers to appoint high court judges and shape the judiciary in its image. This would be the end of checks and democracy.

What interest does the AKP have in settling with its opponents? Secular Turkey is too large for the AKP to digest even if the party were successful in eating its secularist opponents for political lunch. Secular Turks, with their supporting media, businesses, lobby groups, political parties and NGOs, in their sheer numbers, will not simply disappear. Opinion polls that measure attitudes toward the AKP and its conservative values suggest that 32 to 38 percent of Turks (upward of 25 million people) would never support the AKP or resolve to live in a country shaped solely by its values. Besides, now the AKP has to take into account Kilicdaroglu.

The vision of a new Turkey that provides room for everyone requires a new and lasting political balance between the AKP and New Kemalism. The country's ruling party must re-embrace liberalism and its Kemalist adversaries must evolve, presenting Kilicdaroglu with an historic mission. This is a game changer that might even bring Ataturk's party back to power in Turkey.

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