

## What Could Erdogan Learn from Obama?

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Articles & Testimony

**T**oday, most Turks agree that their country needs a new Constitution. There is disagreement, however, on how this Constitution should be drafted. The governing Justice and Development Party, or AKP, needs 367 of the 550 votes in Parliament to pass a new Constitution. It currently has 337 deputies. A referendum is needed if the draft Constitution receives between 330 and 367 votes in the legislature; it fails if it gets less than 330 votes.

The AKP has a majority in the Turkish Parliament, but not a supermajority. Should AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan single-handedly draft a Constitution, or should he build consensus to this end? In this regard, Mr. Erdogan might find inspiration in U.S. President Barack Obama, for Mr. Obama, too, has a pressing legislative issue, healthcare reform, and like Mr. Erdogan, Mr. Obama enjoys a majority in the U.S. legislature. Yet, since the Democratic Party's loss in the Massachusetts Senate elections, Mr. Obama is also short of a legislative supermajority. The two leaders face similar political fortunes and to this end, Mr. Erdogan might draw lessons from Mr. Obama's current strategy.

Mr. Obama made healthcare reform one of his election campaign pillars and placed it on top of his agenda after taking office. On Dec. 13, 2009, he said, "I think that when we look back after I sign this [healthcare] bill, people are going to acknowledge that not only was this the most important piece of domestic legislation since at least Social Security, but it also tackled the biggest problem that we had in terms of our long-term fiscal well-being."

However, Mr. Obama realized that he does not have the public backing needed for his proposed healthcare reforms after losing the late Senator Ted Kennedy's seat in Massachusetts -- what had been "the Kennedy" seat for more than 40 years. Despite calls from some in the Democratic leadership to pass the healthcare legislation before the newly elected Republican Senator in Massachusetts, Scott Brown, takes office, breaking the Democratic Party's supermajority in the U.S. Senate; President Obama made it clear that the American people's message was well-received.

Mr. Obama recognized that losing the Senate elections in Massachusetts in January, and governor races in Virginia and New Jersey in November, was a popular message. The implications of losing Massachusetts to a Republican opponent are quite significant. Democrats lost the 60th vote needed to block Republican filibusters in the Senate and pass legislation. Yet, instead of ramming the legislation through Congress for an easy triumph, Mr. Obama has opted for something more difficult: He has decided to engage his critics and attempt to turn them into partners by convincing them of the benefits of healthcare reform.

In Turkey, there is opposition to the drafting of a new Constitution by a single party in charge, the arguments being that the Constitution should not be rushed before the national elections to be held in July 2011 and that the Constitution should be based on wider political and public support.

Mr. Erdogan technically has the political power to push for a new Constitution. Though, if he were to look at Mr. Obama, Mr. Erdogan could benefit from starting a public debate while engaging the opposition and the public at large over a new Constitution. The framework for this debate should focus on how to strengthen Turkey's liberal democracy while jumpstarting the European Union accession process.

So what has Mr. Obama been doing that could set specific examples for Mr. Erdogan's strategy? Listening to the opposition and engaging critics is the answer. On Jan. 30, President Obama voluntarily participated in a meeting of the U.S. House Republicans, where he directly answered questions on his policies for 90 minutes. He will soon start hosting bipartisan brainstorming sessions. His engagement efforts also have social aspects -- last weekend, Republicans were invited to watch the Super Bowl at the White House, and similar events will be held at Camp David and other venues.

Following Mr. Obama's strategy, it will help Turkey to have an extensive debate on the new Constitution. In addition to creating dialogue with the opposition, the AKP should involve NGOs, civil society, academia, youth organizations, jurists and other stakeholders. At the end of the day, a new Constitution affects everybody's life in Turkey, not just the ruling party and its followers. It is of utmost importance to patiently formulate the new Constitution and secure broad buy-in.

Even though it is not common to see a governing party with a majority engage the opposition in Turkey, Mr. Obama's take on democracy could be inspirational for Mr. Erdogan, who faces a very vocal opposition and a very polarized country. In this regard, Mr. Erdogan might consider attending sessions organized by critics and answering questions on the new Constitution. He can also leverage this process as a means to make more headway with the opposition. Such an environment would create more transparency into the process and allow the Turkish public to better identify who is the go-getter and who is the road-blocker on the new Constitution.

Given the importance of what a new Constitution entails, the ultimate goal for Mr. Erdogan should be a grand compromise across the country, not just a political win. Turkey needs to become a more democratic country where all segments of society feel represented and secure. Erdogan's attitude on this will identify what's more important -- being a politician or being a statesman.

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