

A Bridge to Change

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Articles & Testimony

According to Forbes Magazine, Turkey, with 13 billionaires, counts among the top 11 countries with the most billionaires, tied with Brazil. Before the financial crisis hit last year, Turkey had 35 billionaires. Turkey is rich in billionaires because it has a billionaire-making machine: Istanbul, the country's business capital and home to over 40 percent of the Turkish economy.

For more than three decades, Istanbul's unique geography has nurtured the emergence of a social class of billionaires benefiting from government contracts. As the world's only city divided between two continents, Istanbul has twice seen the construction of suspension bridges uniting the country across the Bosphorus Strait, which bifurcates the city. Those bridge projects, completed in 1973 and 1988, respectively, facilitated massive economic growth: The unification of Istanbul's parts has twice produced a city economy larger than the sum of its parts. That, in turn, led to the emergence of two generations of billionaires. Lucrative government contracts for the construction of bridges and beltways and land speculation deals facilitated the billionaire-making process each time the city built a bridge.

Now, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP's, plans to build a third bridge across the Bosphorus, a move that would further unite Istanbul's disparate halves and spur economic growth in Turkey's business capital. The AKP's move, however, also promises the birth of a third and starkly different generation of Turkish billionaires -- one beholden to the AKP's political, social and foreign policy agenda.

Turkey's billionaires have traditionally been the standard-bearers of secular, Western, liberal values in Turkey, loyal to the secular governments that produced them. In the 1970s, the building of the First Bosphorus Bridge helped pro-government businesses, which benefited from the emergent synergy of Istanbul's economy created by the bridge's beltway, which united the city for the very first time.

Turkey's first class of billionaires coalesced in the business association the Turkish Association of Businessmen and Industrialists, or TUSIAD, which became a voice for secular, Western Turkey. TUSIAD promoted free-market economics, and once that was set in place, pushed for European Union accession in the 1990s and 2000s. It also became a patron of Western values in the country, promoting democratic freedoms, setting up world-class universities, and funding cultural activities ranging from Istanbul's jazz and film festivals to private museums that brought to the Turks Picasso and Dali exhibits. TUSIAD became the promoter and safety valve of European Turkey.

The construction of the Second Bosphorus Bridge in the 1980s by the government of then-Prime Minister Turgut Ozal yielded yet another class of billionaires who shared the political vision of the government that nurtured its birth. When the bridge was completed in 1988, once again the city's economy leaped, growing geometrically as a result of unification. Construction work for the bridge and the city's second beltway added to the profits further. The ensuing class of "Ozal's billionaires" joined TUSIAD and promoted Western values with a hint of social conservatism. "Ozal's billionaires" also supported a pro-American foreign policy, as per Ozal's Weltanschauung.

Predictably, the AKP's Third Bosphorus Bridge promises to create a new class of Turkish billionaires -- "plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose." In fact, a pro-AKP business lobby has already emerged thanks to government contracts. The "AKP's rich" is, so far, no match for TUSIAD, but the party is no doubt preparing its ascendance. Just before the March 2009 local elections, the AKP created new boroughs in the city's outlying areas in anticipation of the path of the Third Bosphorus Bridge and its beltway. The party easily won the elections in these gerrymandered boroughs, including the now fringe areas of Sancaktepe, Cekmekoy, Arnavutkoy, and Basaksehir, which have become AKP-controlled hotspots for land speculation and construction with the Third Bosphorus Bridge. The ground is set for Turkey's third generation of billionaires.

If Istanbul's bridge-to-billionaires cycle repeats itself now, the new generation of billionaires will be the AKP's own class loyal to the party's vision. At home, this vision dictates orthopraxy in the public space: that is, promoting outward displays of homogenous religious practice and social conservatism, though not necessarily faith. Last year in Istanbul, I came across a young Muslim-Greek Orthodox Turkish woman who had applied for a job with an AKP-controlled Istanbul city government branch. In her job interview, she was told the government would hire her if she agreed to wear a headscarf. When she responded that she was Greek Orthodox, the woman was told "you don't need to convert; all you have to do is cover your head."

In the past, generations of working- and middle-class Turks grew up as Westerners thanks to the European cultural values championed by TUSIAD and "Ozal's billionaires." Yet soon, generations of Turks will grow up with cultural institutions, values, and mores, including orthopraxy, promoted by the AKP and its billionaires.

Turkey's popular foreign policy attitudes will also change as a result. The AKP's foreign policy vision entails support for Muslim and Islamist causes, especially those in the Middle East, as well as a cozy, financially-rooted relationship with Russia. Hence, after the next bridge-to-billionaires cycle is completed, expect a new business elite in Turkey that takes its cues from the governing party, fundraising for Hamas, lobbying against Iran sanctions and empathizing with Sudan and Hezbollah. EU accession will weaken next to profitable energy deals and stronger ties with Russia.

Countries change not when their governments change, but when their elites, especially their billionaires, change. Changes in Turkey since the rise of the AKP in 2002 will fade in comparison with the transformation to be ushered in by the coming third generation of billionaires. Bridges across the Bosphorus not only make the rich in Turkey, but also have the potential to remake the country. The Third Bosphorus Bridge will be Turkey's bridge to change.

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