

Turkey's Waning Appetite for Europe

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Articles & Testimony

When the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi: AKP) government took power in Turkey and vowed to pursue EU accession in 2002, there were broad expectations that Turkey would soon join the ranks of liberal European democracies. Six years later, those expectations have been dashed as Turkey's liberalisation appears to have stalled. Less free and less equal, Turkey is further away from certain European norms today than it was in 2002.

Initially, the AKP aggressively pushed for EU accession. Just as Turkey began membership talks with the EU in October 2005, however, the party's appetite for European membership waned. Populist instincts led the AKP to shy away from the unpopular domestic and foreign policy steps needed to enter the EU.

More importantly, the European Court of Human Rights' November 2005 decision to uphold Turkey's ban on Islamic style headscarves on college campuses upset the AKP. The party had hoped that Europe would help it recalibrate Turkey's secularism, but, with the European Court decision, Europe signalled that it was content with the status quo. The AKP's utilitarian approach to EU accession seems exhausted. The party, which was re-elected in 2007, appears to have lost its appetite for the EU, turning away from the dream of a liberal Turkey.

The European Court decision has had a debilitating effect on liberal democratic values in Turkey. After 2005, although Turkey theoretically moved closer to the EU by negotiating chapters on various technical issues such as restaurant hygiene, it actually slipped away from European values including gender equality.

Various international indices measuring gender equality and media freedoms show that for instance, according to the UN's Development Programme gender empowerment index, in 2002 Turkey was ranked 63rd in the world. In 2008, it slipped to 90th place, falling behind Saudi Arabia. Likewise, the World Economic Forum's gender gap report shows a similar slippage post-2005, from 105th in 2006 to 123rd in 2008 out of 130 countries - indicating a widening of inequality between the sexes.

In part, such change seems to be engineered through bureaucratic appointments. A study by IRIS, an Ankara-based non-governmental organisation, pointed to the diminishing number of women in the upper echelons of the state bureaucracy: the percentage of women in governmental executive positions declined from 15.1 per cent in 1994 to 11.8 per cent in 2008.

Women Lose Out

Gender inequality is also affected by legislation. In July 2008, the AKP passed a social security law that slashed benefits for working women, including cutting post-natal financial allowances to working mothers from six months to one month.

The AKP's choice to legislate on women in employment has not been without consequences. Although the Turkish economy created an average 1.1 per cent increase in employment annually between 2003 and 2007, women's employment dropped by 0.8 per cent in the same period, according to research conducted by the Turkish Federation of Entrepreneurs and Business World.

Turkey has become not only less equal but also less free under the AKP. Freedom House, the independent US non-governmental organisation, which campaigns for the spread of democracy, publishes an annual freedom of the press index. While the Turkish media ranked 100 for freedom of the press in 2002, it slipped to 103 in 2008, behind Qatar and Kuwait.

Legal Challenge

Once again, legislation and administrative acts seem to be driving the process. Under the AKP, the government's media watchdog, the High Commission of Radio and TV (RTUK), has become a censor. Article 4 of RTUK's founding law has a list of clauses under which it can sanction television networks, ranging from blasphemy to 'violation of moral values'. The list runs from A to Z, and as one Turkish journalist commented: "If the Turkish alphabet had letters beyond Z, the list would have gone on."

The RTUK closely monitors the Turkish media with the threat of fines or, ultimately, a ban on entire television networks if they are seen to have breached its rules on morality and decency. As a result, networks have altered their coverage of political news concerning the government. One network even shaded out a scene showing John Wayne drinking whiskey in a classic western film, after the RTUK called on television networks to not show drinking scenes.

Limitations on personal freedoms under the AKP include restrictions on the internet. At least a quarter of the country's 72 million population regularly use the internet. In April 2007, a new law was passed which made Turkey the only European country to ban access to certain websites, such as YouTube. Turkey's slide away from European values of equality and freedom could hamper the country's dream to join the EU.

The US has historically viewed Turkey as a key strategic ally in central Europe. As US President-elect Barack Obama takes office, the AKP faces a dilemma: launch Turkey back on the dream of a liberal European country, or unravel their political mirage.

Test of Nerves

The AKP faces a test with the Obama administration. Should the party take Turkey back to the path of liberalisation and convergence with European values, it will have a good start in its relationship with the Obama administration. Mr Obama has already stated he aims to foster closer co-operation between the US and the EU. Otherwise, it is likely that the AKP-Obama relationship will be a tense one, with problems especially in the areas of liberal values, freedoms and lack of progress towards a European Turkey.

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