

Turkish Troubles

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Articles & Testimony

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Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party, the AKP, emerged victorious in the July 22 parliamentary elections with a solid 47 percent of the vote. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in office since 2003, will also head the next government. While rooted in Turkey's Islamist opposition, the AKP declared itself a liberal movement when it came to power five years ago. So, as the party gets ready for another five years in office, is the AKP really a liberal party? Let's have a look at its record so far.

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Under the AKP, there have been two dramatic changes in Turkey. First, the country has become a choice market for foreign investment. Until 2003, Turkey attracted a measly \$1 billion a year in foreign direct investment. By contrast, in 2006, Turkey received over \$20 billion. The AKP has privatized state-owned enterprises. Thanks to its pro-business policies, the AKP has rightfully received much praise as an economically liberal party.

However, capitalism alone does not make a country liberal. It also needs a sense of common destiny with the Western world, a sense sorely missing in the AKP's Turkey.

In addition to the FDI boom, a second and decidedly illiberal shift has taken place in Turkey under the AKP. Before the party took office, Turkey ranked first in pro-American sentiment among Muslim majority countries. According to polls, once staunchly pro-Western Turkey has now become the most anti-American country in the world. A 2007 Pew Center Poll puts Turkey at the bottom of the list; fewer than 9 percent of Turks today say they like the United States, and I think I know all of them.

Part of the decline in Turkish pro-American attitudes can be attributed to the lack of U.S. action in response to terror attacks by the Kurdistan Workers Party, the PKK, from its safe haven in northern Iraq. Yet the drop in pro-American sentiment in Turkey is sharper than in the broader Middle East. Today the percentage of Turks who hate the U.S. is higher than among Palestinians, and the slump in pro-American sentiments in Turkey is four times greater than that in Jordan.

Anti-Westernism comes through clearly in the AKP's rhetoric, acts and bureaucratic appointments. The ruling party has for years lambasted the U.S. for its actions in Iraq. For instance, the AKP head of the human rights commission in the Turkish parliament claimed in November 2004 that the U.S. troops were committing massacres in Iraq. In February 2006, the AKP speaker of the parliament praised the notorious film Valley of the Wolves, which depicts the Iraq war as an organ-harvesting operation run by greedy Jews and American fundamentalist Christians. After this positive endorsement, a record-breaking 4.5 million Turks went to see the film.

Recently, the AKP has muted its anti-U.S. rhetoric and boosted cooperation with Washington on important issues, including Iraq. Three-fourths of all cargo going to Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, flies through Turkey. But while the AKP benefits from good ties with Washington, the government fails to explain such ties to the Turkish public.

Not long ago, I chatted with three 17-year-old Turks in a lower-middle class suburb of Istanbul. The staunchly secular men had come of age during the war, and had only horrible things to say about the U.S. When I asked for proof of their claims that the U.S. was committing war crimes in Iraq, they cited repeated AKP statements on the issue. That an overwhelming majority of Turks do not read English or other foreign languages means that they form impressions of the U.S. through local papers and the daily rhetoric of their country's leaders. After years of anti-U.S. rhetoric, a negative view of the United States is now so pervasive that secular Turks, and their parties, are also on board.

The AKP has distanced itself from the West with specific policies, as well. Before the AKP, Turkey had a thriving military relationship with Israel. Joint defense projects totaling over \$3.3 billion between 1995 and 2003 formed an important pillar of growing bilateral ties. What's more, these contracts provided Turkey with sensitive high-tech weaponry that proved useful in its struggle against the PKK. This is not the case today, as a bureaucrat from the Turkish Defense Ministry told me during a recent visit to Ankara. Since 2003, companies doing business with Israel have been methodically excluded from defense contracts. Defense projects with Israel have totalled only \$245 million in the past four years.

True, Turkey hands out fewer defense contracts today than in the 1990s. And even then, for some reason, the contracts the Israelis get move into a slow motion world. For instance, the largest AKP era Israeli-Turkish deal, an unmanned aerial vehicle (drone) project, is at a standstill. The Israeli company that's due to deliver the drones to Turkey by next year has been granted only one meeting with the AKP-run bureaucracy.

Finally, the AKP's appointments are driving illiberalism. I was recently in Midyat, in southeastern Turkey, to see the monasteries of the Syriac Church. Many Syriac Christians were driven out of their homes by the PKK in the 1990s. A community leader told me that before the AKP, government authorities were helpful in facilitating their return. But the new AKP-appointed officials have a negative attitude toward Christians. When community leaders paid the newly arrived provincial governor a courtesy visit, the governor's first words were: "I am a Muslim," hardly the words befitting a liberal, secular state. And the return of Christians to Midyat has now been encumbered. In one of their villages, Elbegendi, the Christians have built new homes with the hope of returning, but the AKP governor has refused to pave their roads. So Elbegendi is a Kafkaesque site, with brand new villas, mud on the streets and no public services in sight.

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From Midyat to the suburbs of Istanbul, a new Turkey is taking shape, away from the attention of Western financial markets, the glitter of Istanbul's moneyed class, and the fancy drinking holes on the Bosphorus. Capitalism alone does not make a party or country Western or liberal.

The new AKP government can prove its liberal credentials in its second turn in power by desisting from political illiberalism and anti-Westernism. This is a chance Turkey cannot afford to miss.

Mr. Cagaptay, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, is the author of *Islam, Secularism, Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who Is a Turk?* (Routledge, 2006). ❖

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