

Challenges for the Justice and Development Party Government in Turkey

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Brief Analysis

The Turkish parliament will meet tomorrow for its first session since the elections of November 3, in which a party with an Islamist pedigree -- the conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) -- secured a majority, winning 363 of 550 seats (the social-democratic Republican People's Party [CHP] is the only other party in parliament, with 178 seats; independents won the remaining 9 seats). Over the next few days, AKP leader Tayyip Erdogan is expected to meet with President Necdet Sezer, who has the power to appoint the next prime minister. For the first time since 1954, Turkey has a two-party parliament, in which AKP will rule. Will this be a successful experiment? What are some of the challenges facing this government?

Foreign Policy

One test for AKP will be its foreign policy stance. The party's performance in this area has raised eyebrows during the past several days. Initially, certain remarks by AKP leaders -- such as Vice Chair Murat Mercan's strong criticism of the current Israeli government on November 5, or Erdogan's comment on November 6 that Turkey would not allow the United States to use Turkish bases in the event of a campaign against Iraq -- caused jitters among some analysts. Yet, such comments were later attributed more to the party's lack of experience in governance than to its desire to reformulate Turkish foreign policy. Accordingly, on November 8, Mercan highlighted AKP's commitment to the main tenets of Turkish foreign policy -- the desire to: join the European Union (EU), enhance relations with the Western world, and increase regional cooperation. He added that Turkey's strategic relations with Israel would not change, and that religious and ideological concerns would not determine foreign policy under AKP. Moreover, on November 9, the party's second man Abdullah Gul added that Turkey would support an American invasion of Iraq if authorized by the United Nations. This is very much in line with the current Turkish position of "qualified and cautious" support for an American campaign. In other words, if UN authorization is granted, and if America addresses Turkish concerns (e.g., the preservation of Iraq's territorial integrity; reparations for the financial damage that would likely accompany a war), then Ankara might treat the matter as a military affair, to be handled by the army.

Despite AKP's assurances that it will maintain the nonpartisan nature of Turkish foreign policy (e.g., on November 8, Mercan stated, "our foreign policy is national policy, which does not change when governments change"), analysts

might have to wait until the party takes office before they can get a true sense of that policy.

Social Policy

Social policy presents perhaps the biggest potential fault line for AKP. Pressure from AKP's hardcore voters (a vocal minority) could lead the party leadership to focus on issues that are of immediate concern to this minority, such as legalizing the wearing of headscarves in public buildings (the Turkish interpretation of secularism forbids religious expression in government buildings). Yet, the headscarf and other similar concerns have an iconic quality in Turkey -- the secularists see them as the embodiment of political Islam, while most conservative Muslims see them as expressions of faith. If AKP took action on this issue without first building a consensus, the secularists could view it as evidence that the party was endorsing political Islam. This could lead to a confrontation between AKP and the secularist camp (the media, courts, nongovernmental organizations, the army, CHP, and other parties), in addition to alarming the party's moderate voters, who would shy away from confrontation. Moderation brought AKP to power, and moderation will keep it in power. If AKP were to be seen as challenging secularism, the party could lose support among Turks in general, who have traditionally voted against contentious parties. (The demise of the Islamist Welfare Party [RP], which confronted secularism in the late 1990s, illustrates this phenomenon: in 1995, RP received 20 percent of the vote, while its 2002 incarnation, the Felicity Party, received a meager 1.6 percent on November 3.)

Erdogan's Role

For decades, Turkey's Islamist movement has served as the opposition. To the extent that they have reinvented themselves, the AKP's cadres, who are mostly rooted in this opposition, need to think differently now that they have come to power. AKP needs to start seeing itself as the government of Turkey.

In this regard, the first challenge for AKP is whether Erdogan will be able to take office as prime minister. A September 20 court decision bars him from political office due to his 1997 conviction for inciting religious hatred. Last week, AKP implied that Gul might temporarily take office until Erdogan's ban ends in February 2003. Even then, however, Erdogan may not be allowed to run the country; he does not have a parliamentary seat, and Article 109 of the Turkish constitution stipulates that the prime minister must be a member of the parliament. AKP initially considered drafting a constitutional amendment in order to overcome this handicap. Yet, after CHP voiced strong opposition to this proposal yesterday (arguing that changing the constitution to benefit one individual would set a bad precedent), Erdogan said that he would not push for eliminating Article 109 and that he does not have to take part in the next government. It appears that for now, this issue has been put on the back burner. In the future, AKP might devise a solution to this problem in consultation with President Sezer and CHP, such as having Erdogan elected to the parliament in by-elections; however, the earliest that such elections could be held is April 3, 2003, and only if at least twenty-eight current members of parliament were to vacate their seats.

Consensus could also help AKP address some of the country's most pressing issues, including the economic crisis, EU accession, and further democratization in relation to EU membership. Given its parliamentary majority, AKP could legislate alone on these matters, but it would be better served by collaborating with CHP and other political groups. There are signs of such cooperation already; on November 8, Erdogan asked various nongovernmental organizations to tour European capitals with him in order to lobby for EU accession. CHP leader Deniz Baykal may also join in this alliance.

A broad, gradually built social consensus for change would also increase the legitimacy of the new parliament, which represents only 55 percent of the vote (various smaller parties received a combined 45 percent of the vote, yet they could not meet the 10 percent threshold for admittance to the legislature). For instance, the new government could implement several politically creative measures, such as increasing the rights and liberties of all Turks, passing legislation on pressing economic issues, addressing the headscarf issue, and lifting the political ban on Erdogan, all

as part of a widely supported reform package. In fact, AKP's current commitment to implementing the International Monetary Fund's stand-by agreement and economic reforms sets a precedent for consensus and coalition building. With this strategy, AKP could not only avoid a potential clash with the secularist camp, but also further democratize the country while accelerating the EU accession process.

Why Should AKP's Success Matter?

Turkey has sixty years of democratic elections and eighty years of secularism under its belt. Today, Turkish democracy is testing AKP. It would be an encouraging development indeed if the party continued on its moderate path, avoiding political Islam and promoting democracy and secularism instead. AKP's success would not only be a positive test for Turkish democracy, it would also inspire optimists in the global debate about the compatibility of Islam and democracy.

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