

# AKP Victory in Turkey

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**T**he one-year-old pro-Islamist Justice and Development Party [AKP] won an unexpected landslide victory; probably changing the way the Turkish government will deal with its economic and political situation, and its relationships with Europe and the United States. VOA-TV's David Borgida had a discussion with Soner Cagaptay, Soref Fellow and Coordinator, Turkish Research Program from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and Bulent Aliriza, the Turkey Project Director, at CSIS concerning the probable direction of this new Turkish government. They appeared on the VOA program, "NewsLine."

MR. BORGIDA: Now joining us, two experts on the Turkish political situation, Bulent Aliriza, from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and Soner Cagaptay, of the Washington Institute here. Gentlemen, thank you for joining us. Let's begin with you, Mr. Cagaptay. The AKP may have a harder time actually governing than it did winning the election. Your thoughts on what challenges it has ahead.

MR. CAGAPTAY: I think one of the major challenges AKP faces is that it has to balance its position of being a party for Turkey and a party for its constituency. Its constituency is basically a diverse area of voters, from people coming from the Islamist tradition in the country, as far right to that, as to the center voters who are generally moderate urban voters. And the party has to find a balance between the aspirations of these two as it becomes the ruling party of Turkey. So, as it is undertaking reforms to further liberalize the country's political system, to facilitate Turkey's E.U. accession, and as well as to cope with the country's ongoing economic slump, it will have to dance on very thin ice in balancing what its hardcore constituency will ask for -- meaning reforms that will be palatable to the Islamist opposition in Turkey, as well as its main constituency, the moderate voters of the AKP party who will be wanting the party to primarily address concerns that are more pressing for them, such as E.U. accession and the economy.

MR. BORGIDA: Mr. Aliriza, let's talk for a minute about who and what is this party? They call themselves, I believe, a modern conservative party, and yet there are those who believe it is more Islamic in nature. Help us understand who they are.

MR. ALIRIZA: They come out of the Islamic movement. The Islamic movement has had a number of parties which have been banned, including the Welfare Party that was in government in 1996-1997, of which Mr. Erdogan was the Mayor of Istanbul. But in view of the fact that Islamist parties have all been banned in the past, wisely this party has said that it is not Islamist. It has said that it is a modern democratic party. How persuasive that will be to the two-thirds of the Turkish electorate that did not vote for it really depend on their actions.

MR. BORGIDA: Let's talk a little bit about the military gentlemen. Mr. Cagaptay, the military apparently is saying,

okay, we can live with this party at the moment. But do you expect precarious moments in the weeks and months ahead in Turkey between the military and this government?

MR. CAGAPTAY: I would suggest that both the military and the Islamist opposition in Turkey have drawn some certain lessons from the recent years, and the recent confrontation between the military and the Islamist parties in 1996. And I think one of the lessons they have learned is that whereas the military and, in large, the secularist bloc in Turkey, has learned to accommodate the moderate Islamists, in the same way the Islamists have learned to recognize and acknowledge secularism as a paradigm of Turkish politics. So, I would argue that so long as these two paradigms are respected, we would not necessarily expect a showdown. But that is not to say that this is going to be a smooth ride.

MR. BORGIDA: Mr. Aliriza, what do you expect from the United States and the Bush administration in terms of that bilateral relationship, Turkey and the United States? If the United States were to wind up with some military action in Iraq, Turkey is a key ally. How would this affect that critical relationship?

MR. ALIRIZA: Not very much. I mean, the fact is that the current government, which has lost power because of its disastrous showing in the elections, was opposed to the war. Most Turks, according to opinion polls 80 percent of the Turkish people, are opposed to war. Nonetheless, if the day comes when the U.S. knocks on Turkey's door, in accordance with a U.N. resolution, a government that involves Mr. Erdogan and his party, in conjunction with the military, will probably say yes to the use of the air bases and the airspace. But this government is not enthusiastic, would not be enthusiastic, and neither is the one that is outgoing.

MR. BORGIDA: What do you think, too, Mr. Cagaptay, about relations with Europe?

MR. CAGAPTAY: I think on relations with Europe, the AKP party has already shown tremendous resolve to continue on Turkey's path of accession. In fact, I was very impressed to hear that the first public comment, the leader of the party, Tayyip Erdogan, made after the elections was that his priority was Turkey's E.U. accession. So, in this regard, I think there is a very broad consensus in Turkey for E.U. accession, which has been challenged only by a few parties that did very poorly in the election. So, I would say that this is still on Turkey's top agenda.

MR. ALIRIZA: The problem is not on the Turkish side; it is on the European side. The Europeans are not keen on having this country with 70 million people, with a soft economy, knocking on their door at a time when they are about to absorb 10 other countries. So, the question will be how to tell the Turks that they are not going to be let in tomorrow without necessarily alienating them from their commitment towards the community of nations. And that is going to be very difficult.

MR. BORGIDA: What else may be difficult could include the economy. What are your thoughts about what can be done in the months ahead in terms of the tough problem there economically?

MR. ALIRIZA: Well, that may be the single most important issue facing the current government, satisfying the expectations of the people who elected them. It will be difficult, when you have an economy that owes so much money to the IMF and to everybody else, and you have an economic program backed by the IMF that restricts your ability to dole out money. Clearly, Erdogan is hoping that the current wave of optimism with the Turkish stock market and the financial world outside continues, and that that allows him some leeway that he doesn't currently have.

MR. BORGIDA: Mr. Cagaptay, the markets finally are wary, though, of Turkey and its economic problems, right?

MR. CAGAPTAY: Well, yes. But I would agree with Mr. Aliriza that the markets have shown some confirmation, or optimism, for Turkey's ongoing political processes. And I think in this regard the kind of message Turkey gets from the European Union is going to be fairly decisive in the continuing faith of the international market in Turkey and its

welfare in the near future. If the E.U. outright refuses Turkey in December, in its Copenhagen Summit, that is going to be a terrible message to international markets; as opposed to if the E.U. accommodates Turkey somehow, that is going to be a more positive message.

MR. BORGIDA: The views of Soner Cagaptay and Bulent Aliriza. Thank you so much, gentlemen, for joining us on the Turkish political situation. We appreciate your time very much.

MR. ALIRIZA: Thank you.

MR. CAGAPTAY: Thank you. ❖

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