



## **THE NOVEMBER 2002 ELECTIONS AND TURKEY'S NEW POLITICAL ERA**

By Soner Cagaptay\*

*The November 2002 elections brought a landslide victory for the Justice and Development Party (AKP) which received almost two-thirds' of the parliamentary seats with 34.2 percent of the vote. This article analyzes how this dramatic development affects Turkish politics and society, and what the new government's policies are likely to be.*

On November 3, 2002, the Turks went to the polls to elect their new government. The elections ushered in a major realignment of the Turkish political landscape, bringing the Justice and Development Party (AKP)--a party with an Islamist pedigree--to power. The AKP received 34.2 percent of the vote, winning 363 of the 550 seats in the Turkish parliament. Of the eighteen parties running in the elections, the social democrat Republican People's Party (CHP) was the only other party to win parliamentary representation, garnering 19.4 percent of the vote and 178 seats (the remaining 9 seats went to independent candidates).(1)

On the other hand, the major parties that ran the country in the 1990s, the center-left Democratic Left Party (DSP) of outgoing Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), and former President Turgut Ozal's centrist Motherland Party (ANAP) failed to pass the ten percent threshold needed to enter the parliament. Islamist opposition Felicity (previously Welfare) Party (SP), and former Prime Minister Tansu Ciller's center-right True Path Party (DYP) were also unsuccessful in winning representation in the parliament. How can we explain this realignment of the Turkish political landscape? What does AKP's success mean for the future of Turkish politics?

### **UNDERSTANDING AKP'S ELECTION VICTORY**

Although the AKP is an offshoot of the Islamist Welfare Party (RP), which was banned in 1997 for Islamist activities, the electorate sees the party as a new force and not necessarily Islamist. Various secular parties, courts, media outlets, and nongovernmental organizations view the party with suspicion due to its leaders' past affiliation with RP. Yet, AKP's moderate, non-confrontational rhetoric over the last year has made it attractive to a diverse array of voters ranging from Islamists to rural nationalists and moderate urban voters.

A second factor explaining AKP's success is that the party has been able to channel some of the profound anger that characterized the November 3 elections. AKP appealed to middle and working class voters, who were unsatisfied with the economic plans of the outgoing government that were backed by the International Monetary Fund. Such anger in Turkey has traditionally been concentrated at the lower ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. After the February 2001 economic meltdown, however, even the middle classes became angry.

Accordingly, AKP attracted many moderate urban voters, who were appalled

by the inefficient and corruption-ridden governments of the 1990s, as well as by the political instability and economic downturns that characterized this decade. Many voters turned to AKP, which marketed itself as new and untainted by the legacy of the 1990s. AKP promised to deliver growth and stability, as in the Turgut Ozal years of the 1980s, a decade to which most Turks now look back with nostalgia.(2)

On the other hand, the November elections were also very much about the personality of AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan. A lot of people indirectly voted for him, regardless of his controversial pedigree or the legal obstacles he faced. (Prior to the elections, a September 20 court decision barred Erdogan from taking political office due to his conviction in 1998, which sent him to jail briefly for inciting religious hatred after he publicly read a poem interpreted as advocating an Islamist revolution.)

Thus, a variety of factors, and not its Islamist pedigree, seem to have brought AKP to power. But will the party's Islamist pedigree shape its policies in government? If not, to what extent will AKP represent a fresh perspective in Turkish politics?

### **WHAT IS NEW IN TURKISH POLITICS?**

It seems necessary to sketch a picture of the post-November 3 political landscape in the country in order to define AKP government's role in this framework. This should also help address the issue of continuity and change in Turkish politics. In other words, what would remain the same in the country, and what would be different after November 3?

First, for the first time since the 1954 elections, Turkey gets a two party parliament. So far, Turkish politics has been marked by constant bargaining

between the many parties represented in the parliament, and this has become such an integral part of the country's life that the Turks have no memory of politics in a two-party legislature. Fragmentation of the parliament has helped even the smallest parties achieve brokerage power, which they have cashed into political gains for themselves and economic benefits for their voters.(3) Now AKP and CHP will be the only ones who hold political power. This will make it difficult for parties that have been voted out of the parliament (e.g., ANAP and DYP) to stage a comeback.

A second change in Turkish politics is that after more than a decade of coalition governments, with the November elections, Turkey gets a majority government. Turkey has generally performed well under majority governments, which produced growth and prosperity, in the 1950s, late 1960s, and 1980s. On the other hand, the country has fared rather poorly under coalition cabinets, as in the troublesome decades of the 1970s and the 1990s. Now, a majority AKP government could do well in Turkey, likely putting the country back on the track of political stability and economic growth. Yet, even then, a pressing question remains.

Currently, AKP enjoys a large mandate in the legislature: with 363 representatives in the parliament, the party is only 5 seats short of the two-thirds majority needed to amend the constitution. Will the AKP government, which received its vote of confidence on November 28, interpret this giant majority as a green light to pass any legislation it wishes? If so, such a step raise questions of legitimacy since AKP and CHP together represent only 55 percent of the popular vote, the rest having gone to parties that failed to meet the national threshold for entering the parliament.

In this regard, AKP has passed its first test. The party has tactfully shied away from using its parliamentary majority to

pass fundamental legislation without building a consensus first. One of the burning questions of post-election Turkish politics has been the position of AKP's chair Erdogan, who is unable to hold elected office as prime minister due to his aforementioned conviction. Article 109 of the Turkish constitution stipulates that the prime minister must be a member of the parliament.

Initially, AKP played with the idea of constitutional amendments to change this article to allow Erdogan to take office.(4) However, CHP's leader Deniz Baykal came forth and said that although he was in favor of Erdogan taking office, he was against constitutional amendments to serve that purpose. CHP would not support changing the constitution to benefit one person since such a step would be detrimental to the spirit of law.(5) Afterwards, AKP altered its position, and Erdogan said that he would not push for eliminating Article 109.(6)

On December 13, however, as part of Turkey's European Union (EU) accession process, and in an effort to harmonize Turkish laws with European laws, the parliament amended Article 76 of the constitution, which had banned people convicted of ideological crimes from running for office. The amendment, passed with unanimous CHP and AKP support, has rehabilitated all people stripped of their political rights, including Erdogan.(7) Now it seems that Erdogan will run in by-elections to be held in March 2003. He will likely be elected to the parliament and become eligible to assume the office of prime minister soon afterwards. AKP's strategy in solving the Erdogan question shows that the party not only knows the value of the democratic vote, but also appreciates its limits.

## **MODERATION AND AKP**

Since most of AKP's rank and file members originate from the Islamist RP, AKP can be seen (at least organizationally) as an offshoot of RP, which took power in a confrontational coalition government in 1996. When that party launched Islamist domestic and foreign policy initiatives, it ran up against the powerful secularist bloc which includes CHP and many other political parties, the media, the military, courts, civil-society organizations, religious minorities, as well as many Muslims who want to see a separation of mosque and state.(8)

The secularist reaction, which eventually forced the Islamists to step down from office in 1997, also taught them two valuable lessons. First, secularists will fight back hard against using democracy to attack secularism. Second, in a democracy, moderation is more appealing than either extremism or confrontation.

AKP is a product of these facts. Since its inception in 2001, the party has been aggressively advertising itself as a moderately conservative party that would not challenge secularism. This is the strategy that has helped broaden AKP's appeal beyond RP's traditional support base, catapulting the party into power on November 3. Yet the sort of moderation that has brought AKP to government is also crucial to keeping the party in power. In other words, if AKP begins to challenge secularism, it will lose its political battle to govern Turkey by alienating most of its voters as well as the secularist block. Yet if AKP handles this sort of delicate situation carefully, it would be a positive test for Turkish democracy.

## **CHALLENGES FOR AKP: THE NEED TO BALANCE ITS CONSTITUENCY**

In this regard, social policy presents perhaps the biggest potential fault line for the 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. While the Turkish interpretation of secularism forbids religious expression in government buildings, the headscarf has an iconic quality in Turkey—the secularists see it as the embodiment of political Islam, while most conservative Muslims see it as an expression of faith.

If AKP took action on the headscarf 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 bloc. Additionally, it would alarm the party's moderate voters, who would shy away from confrontation, and perhaps bolt, punishing the AKP for creating tension. 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 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 SP received a meager 1.6 percent on November 3.

AKP is certainly not the party that Erdogan initially established. It has brought individuals with widely varying views into the fold, including moderates such as Erkan Mumcu of ANAP, Koksal Toptan of DYP, and nationalists such as Kursat Tuzmen of MHP. The party's new cabinet also represents this diversity. The AKP government, which was sworn into office on November 28, includes six names from the centrist ANAP, and one each from DYP and MHP.<sup>(9)</sup> Even, the party's central apparatus reflects a diverse array of political opinions.

Thus, if AKP were to take on an extremist agenda, staunch opposition to

such a move might come from within its own ranks. Moderate AKP voters, a majority among the party's supporters, could also join this opposition. Accordingly, it seems that, the party is now caught between the expectations of some of its supporters (who expect AKP to move on certain controversial issues immediately) and the sentiments of its majority moderate supporters. It will be very difficult for the party to satisfy the former without alienating the latter. If AKP fails in this endeavor, the party could split between its moderate voters and its Islamist wing. Besides, despite AKP's electoral success, the fact remains that two-thirds of the country did not vote for it. Because most of these voters harbor suspicion and fear for AKP's core ideologies, the party will have to be careful not to estrange this majority with its policies.

In this regard, one key question remains unanswered in the wake of the elections: did Erdogan truly have a change of heart regarding his Islamic ideals, or did he simply create a perfect, moderate formula by which he could get these ideals elected? Erdogan is a charismatic politician from a poor background. While just a student, he met Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of RP, who became Turkey's first Islamist prime minister in 1996. Erdogan subsequently entered the Islamic movement himself, leading Erbakan's youth group and attending an Islamic high school. A publicly delivered pro-Islamist poem earned him the previously mentioned conviction in 1998 for inciting religious hatred.

Currently, it is difficult to determine whether Erdogan has changed his worldview, in which Islam seems central. Nevertheless, he does seem to have changed his view of politics, and this is what matters. Following the elections, Erdogan reaffirmed that AKP would not

intervene in the lifestyles of the people, would maintain the country's European orientation, and would integrate Turkey with the rest of the world.(10)

### **THE CHALLENGES OF FOREIGN POLICY**

A second test for AKP will be foreign policy. In this regard, there are three main issues: the Iraq dilemma, EU accession, and the resolution of the Cyprus conflict. So far, AKP's foreign policy has presented few surprises. Just as the party has been moderate in domestic politics and shied away from challenging secularism, it has also avoided confronting the main pillar of Turkish foreign policy, its non-partisan orientation.

Initially, the party's foreign policy performance raised eyebrows. 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.(11) 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 EU, enhance relations with the Western world, and increase regional cooperation.(12) 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.

On November 9, the party's second-ranking leader Abdullah Gul added that Turkey would support an American invasion of Iraq if authorized by the United Nations (UN). In other words, if UN authorization is granted, and if America

addresses Turkish concerns (e.g., the preservation of Iraq's territorial integrity and 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.

Given AKP's assurances that the party 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"), it might be expected that the AKP government will further Ankara's current policy of "cautious and qualified" support for Washington vis-à-vis Iraq. That is, if Ankara's sensitivities regarding Iraq are taken into account, Turkey will stand with its longtime ally, the United States.

The AKP government has also aligned with Ankara's traditional line also on the EU. Since taking office, AKP has shown tremendous resolve to push for Turkey's EU membership. In this regard, the party has even considered negotiating a solution to the Cyprus problem, using UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's November 18 draft paper as a basis (13) if such a measure could help Turkey's EU prospects. While the Annan paper envisions reuniting Cyprus under a central government, AKP's keenness to accept this stance might mean that on the Cyprus issue, the party could diverge from the established orientation of Turkish foreign policy. Traditionally, Ankara has stood for the recognition of [Turkish] northern Cyprus as a sovereign state. In fact, Erdogan has already implied such a split, saying, "AKP's vision of Cyprus and Turkey's traditional policy on Cyprus do not overlap."(14)

AKP's willingness to settle the Cyprus issue is linked to its desire to make Turkey an EU member, which in return is rooted in three factors. First, AKP hopes that EU membership would bolster Turkey's democracy, which also means its own

chance to gain and hold onto office. Secondly, joining the EU would provide Turkey with the means to ensure economic growth and political stability. Last but not least, AKP believes that getting into the EU will provide its conservative voter base with increased religious and personal freedoms.

These factors help explain AKP's attitude towards the EU's snubbing of Turkey at the December 12-13, 2002, summit in Copenhagen, at which the EU leadership refused to give Turkey a concrete date on which to start accession talks for membership. Instead, the EU asked that Turkey "improve its human rights record" and come up for a review in December 2004.(15) The AKP government did not condemn the EU's decision despite the fact that Turkey had done its share to qualify for membership.(16) On the contrary, on December 16, AKP declared that it would work to satisfy the EU's demands and make Turkey a fully qualified EU candidate ahead of the union's December 2004 deadline.(17)

### **THE NEED TO EVOLVE INTO THE GOVERNMENT OF TURKEY**

A third challenge for AKP is that Turkey's Islamist movement, in which many of AKP's rank-and-file members are rooted, has spent decades in opposition. To the extent that they have reinvented themselves, AKP cadre, who were trained within this Islamist opposition, need to think differently now that they have come to power. AKP has to start seeing itself as the government of Turkey.

In this regard, consensus building could help AKP address some of Turkey's most pressing issues, including the current economic crisis (the country's most severe slump since World War Two), EU accession, and further political liberalization and democratization in relation to EU membership. Given its

parliamentary majority, AKP could definitely 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, 2002, Erdogan asked various nongovernmental organizations to tour European capitals with him in order to lobby for EU accession. (18) Then, throughout the days leading up to the December 12-13 EU summit, AKP and CHP, along with many non-governmental organizations acted in unison in support of Turkey's EU application process.

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. For instance, the AKP government could implement several politically creative measures, such as increasing the rights and liberties of all Turks, passing legislation on pressing economic issues, and addressing the headscarf issue, 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, started by the previous government, 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? TEST FOR TURKEY**

Turkey has sixty years of democratic elections, eighty years of secularism, and more than two centuries of modernization 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.

\* *Soner Cagaptay is the coordinator of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in Washington, D.C. Cagaptay wrote his doctoral dissertation on Turkish nationalism in the 1930s and has written analyses of contemporary Turkish politics for many newspapers as well as scholarly articles on Turkish nationalism, Kemalism, and the Balkans.*

#### NOTES

1. For a breakdown of the Turkish election results according to parties, see <<http://sandik.superonline.com/index.php?xyz=secimsonuclari&yil=2002>>
2. "Special Policy Forum Report: Turkey Goes to the Polls—A Post-Mortem," Policy Watch Number 675, (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 2002).
3. For a discussion on the Turkish party system, see Sabri Sayari, "The Changing Party System," in Sabri Sayari and Yilmaz Esmer, eds, *Political Parties and Elections in Turkey*, (London: Lynn Rienner, 2002), pp. 1-8.
4. *Milliyet*, November 11, 2002
5. *Milliyet*, November 13, 2002
6. *Milliyet*, December 13, 2002
7. *Milliyet*, December 13, 2002
8. For a review of Turkey's Islamist opposition since 1996-7, see M. Hakan Yavuz, "Cleansing Islam from the Public Sphere and the February 28 Process," *Journal of International Affairs* (Columbia University Press), Vol. 52, No. 1 (Fall 2000), pp. 21- 42. For a work that studies the rise of the Welfare Party and its economics, consult Ziya Onis, "The Political Economy of Islamic Resurgence

- in Turkey: The Rise of the Welfare Party in Perspective," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 743-67.
9. Ayca Ariyoruk, "The New Cabinet in Turkey: Who is Who?" Policy Watch Number 683, (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 2002).
  10. *Sabah*, November 4, 2002
  11. *Associated Press*, November 4, 2002
  12. *Radikal*, November 8, 2002
  13. For the text of the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's Cyprus paper, see <<http://www.tcea.org.uk/Annan-Plan-For-Cyprus-Settlement.htm>>
  14. For the text of EU's response to Turkey at the Copenhagen summit, see <<http://ue.eu.int/newsroom/makeFrame.asp?MAX=&BID=76&DID=73774&LANG=1&File=/pressData/en/ec/73774.pdf&Picture=0>>, pp. 5-6.
  15. *Hurriyet*, December 18, 2002
  16. <<http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/opinion/la-oe-cagaptay13dec13.story>>
  17. *Milliyet*, December 14, 2002
  18. *Milliyet*, December 14, 2002