

المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
ARAB CENTER FOR RESEARCH & POLICY STUDIES  
(Doha Institute)



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**Research Paper**

## *Internal Reform in Turkey*

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*Doha, August - 2011*

***Series (Research Papers)***

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Public opinion was a factor in determining the outcome of the November 2002 legislative elections in Turkey, which removed the old political class and replaced it with the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKP, it was hoped, would be able to lead Turkey out of its domestic impasse, and a reform process began. Arab scholarship on Turkish issues has been divided into two camps since the rise of the AKP:

The **first group** focuses on Turkey's global role, paying attention to its ties with the United States or to other bilateral relationships, such as Turkey's connections to the Islamic Republic of Iran or the Zionist Entity, and how these impact the collective security of the Arabs. The **second group** focuses its studies on questions of Turkey's political and diplomatic roles and questions of values, economics, security and defense and how these are reflected in Turkish Middle East policy.

With regard to internal reforms surrounding the constitution, politics, economics and social questions, these have played a role in the advancement of Turkish society, but have received little attention from Arab researchers. This research report, on the other hand, will seek to address questions previously neglected by Arab scholarship. The aim is to provide evidence for the thesis that internal political reform is not impossible, provided that there is the requisite political will for it. So how and why exactly do factors such as public opinion impact on the question of political reform?

### Turkey before the rise of the AKP to power

The leadership of former Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, who led a coalition government from May 1999 until November 2002, was subject to a number of political and economic crises, none of which were made any better by his deteriorating health. Taken together, these came close to driving Turkey over the precipice. The crisis accelerated during the last couple of years of President Ahmet Necdet Sezer's term in office, which began in 2000). Sezer's closing years were marked by severe dilemmas and conflicts with the rest of the country's secular establishment, one example being his refusal to accept certain appointments after recommendations made by the Higher Education Council. Another example was his refusal to accept a cabinet decision to dismiss hundreds of civil servants who stood accused of being members of Islamist or separatist groups, a stand he based on principle despite his deep commitment to secularism. This was part of a growing constitutional crisis between the legislative and executive branches of government. While the president was in favor of a number of reforms which would bring Turkey closer to the European Union, such as ending the death penalty and allowing the Kurdish language to be broadcast, the broad coalition controlling the legislature, led by Devlet Bahçeli's Nationalist Movement Party, was opposed to these changes: they feared that any leniency with Abdullah Öcalan, head of the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), would cost them a lot of electoral support. This pressure eventually led the party to withdraw from the ruling coalition, precipitating a governmental collapse.

In addition to the foregoing impasses, Turkey's democratic apparatus and institutions were no longer serving their purposes: Parliament had become hostage to the composition of the coalition, proving the inability of the government to solve society's problems. Even coordinating efforts between the different wings of the coalition proved illusive.

The schism between the executive and the legislature also made itself felt in the economy, including the president's refusing a governmental order to privatize three banks. Sezer followed this refusal with a February 2001 executive order authorizing the state's ombudsman to investigate corruption in the banking sector. During the regular monthly meeting of the National Security Council, the president openly criticized the way in which the prime minister was administering public affairs, accusing him of covering up widespread corruption in the country. Storming out of the meeting, Ecevit told journalists waiting for him outside that "[the president] over-stepped the boundaries of decency and respect, and I will not speak to him again until I receive an apology from him."

There were immediate consequences for the Turkish economy. First came the collapse of the money markets, Turkish financial markets being extremely sensitive to political upheavals such as the constant shake-ups of governments during the 1990s; these constant upheavals seemed to undermine the country's efforts to overcome its long-term economic problems. In this instance the consequences included a rapid surge in interest rates to 76% and a run on the Turkish Lira which led to a drop in its value, driving the Turkish Central Bank to pump \$5 billion into the markets in a matter of hours in an effort to relieve the pressure. The Istanbul bourse lost 14% of its value in a single day. On the day following the spat between the president and prime minister, the average Turkish citizen had lost one-third of his or her spending power. This is when the economic situation became even more complicated.

Over the previous decade, a number of government-owned banks had been offering loans to businesspeople on the basis of political affiliation, as opposed to creditworthiness, solvency or the credibility of a business plan. Legislators and other politicians often intervened to secure loans – sometimes without any collateral – for certain individuals as part of efforts to secure political gains. These same politicians would later intervene to legally protect those who could not make their repayments, even going so far as to ask the Central Bank to show compassion to delinquent debtors and their banks, on the grounds that this was "[consistent with] government policy". With no other choice, the Central Bank turned to the government of Turkey, which proffered a simple solution: print more bank notes. This drove up levels of inflation throughout the 1990s, with low-income Turks being the most hard-hit. The Turkish state then took out a \$16 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund, a loan which, of course, came with the caveat of IMF supervision<sup>1</sup>. Turkey abided by the rules set down by the IMF, which entailed serious economic reforms in the country. Yet the IMF plan produced its own disastrous results, which overlapped with the political disturbances described above. In short, the economic scene was characterized by the following:

1. Uncertainty for both public and private banks
2. An increase in the government deficit and the size of foreign debt
3. The attrition of the country's foreign currency reserves

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<sup>1</sup> Hassan, Yasser Ahmad in *Turkey: The Search for the Future*, (in Arabic), Egyptian-Lebanese Publishing, Cairo, 2006, pp. 164-165

4. Government unpreparedness for the foregoing, which led to the closing of thousands of small businesses<sup>2</sup>. This contributed to a decrease in investment, as well as a rise in unemployment<sup>3</sup>.

Together with these economic and political upheavals, the prime minister became gravely ill on May 17, 2002. He remained in an Ankara hospital for 10 days, during which time the internal contradictions of the coalition were exacerbated. He barely had a chance to leave hospital before he had to return for a further week. It soon emerged in press reports that these repeated visits to hospital were not a result of an emergency medical condition, but rather of an illness associated with senility. Soon, there was a movement demanding that the 78-year-old Ecevit step down and that the country hold new parliamentary elections in order to avoid making a bad economic situation worse<sup>4</sup>.

Turkey's political and economic settings, which were spiraling out of control, had a definite and undeniable impact on the fate of the country<sup>5</sup>, driving the other coalition partners to finally call for new elections in a special session of Parliament in September 2002. The polls were scheduled for November<sup>6</sup>. The weight of these crises became so grave that a number of Western observers came to the conclusion that Turkey was at a crossroads, and that it conceivably faced the prospect of disintegration<sup>7</sup>.

### Parliamentary elections in Turkey

The November 3, 2002 elections in Turkey saw the AKP win 363 out of 550 parliamentary seats in the Grand National Assembly, with the Republican People's Party taking a further 178<sup>89</sup>. The same division was repeated, with only slight modifications, after the 2007 elections, which saw the AKP win 341 seats, the Republican People's Party 113, and the National Movement Party 70. Candidates who were associated with the Democratic Society Party won 23 seats, while independents accounted for 3 seats<sup>10</sup>.

The 2002 elections have been described as a historic event, with the AKP, which had sprung out of the more outwardly Islamist Virtue Party of the 1990s, earning the right to form a government

<sup>2</sup> Ozturk, Ibrahim, "Turkish Economic Shifts from 2002 to 2008" (in Arabic), in *Turkey: Domestic Challenges and Foreign Stakes*, Mohammed Abdelatti (ed), Al Arabia Publishing House, Beirut, 2010, p. 48

<sup>3</sup> Shoubaki, Omar, "Turkish Islamism: From Prosperity to Justice and Development", in *The Return of Islamic Ottomanism*, (in Arabic), Turki Dakheel (ed), Al Misbar Publishing, and Aljazeera Center for Studies, 2011, p. 93

<sup>4</sup> Hasan, Yasser Ahmed, *op. cit.*, pp 166-167

<sup>5</sup> Sulieman, Mohammed, "The Experience of the Turkish Justice and Development Party, Part II: Excellence and Creativity", (in Arabic), <http://www.alsar.ws/index.cfm?method=home.com&contetID=5443>

<sup>6</sup> Hasan, Yasser Ahmed, *op. cit.*, pp 178-183

<sup>7</sup> Shoubaki, Omar, *op. cit.*, p. 93

<sup>8</sup> Marco, Jan "The Post-Islamic Period in Turkey" in Turki Dakheel (ed), *op. cit.*, p.12

<sup>9</sup> Ghureiri, Mohammed Yass Khodeir, *The American Role in Turkish Policy Towards the European Union from 1993 to 2010*, (in Arabic), Appendix 1: Doctoral Theses Publication series, No. 92, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, p. 265

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, Appendix 2, p. 266



without having to form a coalition. There were some undoubtedly sound explanations reasons for the AKP's having won both elections. With regard to 2002, one can see the imprints of the societal and economic upheavals facing Turkey at the time<sup>11</sup>. The traditional political class, then led by the center-right had been caught short and saw its power crumbling, while the left seemed to have ossified into irrelevance<sup>12</sup>. Additional factors in the AKP's rise to power included the way in which the old guard of the political establishment had behaved as a sort of cartel, and had lost the ability to produce effective policies to meet the challenges presented by local nationalisms<sup>13</sup>. Following that, the AKP was able to win the 2007 elections after a campaign which highlighted the victories of Prime Minister Abdullah Gul, focusing on his ability to address the nation and his clear view of the troubles which faced Turkey.

The AKP victory was not the triumph of Islamists over secularism, but rather a populist victory which was the culmination of a decade of societal changes in Turkey. The foundation of the AKP's strength lies in the clear and direct approach which it takes with the electorate, an approach which prioritizes economic and social issues above all else as an incentivizing tool for voters. Religion simply did not have a prominent place in the party's agenda. Another factor contributing to the success of the AKP was the party's astute understanding of Turkey's complex political situation, and how its domestic and foreign agendas intersect. It also respects reality as it exists on the ground, practicing pragmatism; in other words, AKP leaders take action based on what they see before their eyes, not on how they would like the world to be. The AKP did not, for example, set itself up in opposition to secularism, choosing instead to focus on reforming Turkish society instead of making the state Islamic. In this way, the AKP avoided entering into a battle it could not win with the military establishment, learning from the lesson of its former associate Necmettin Erbakan. It is a wisdom of the temporal which starts with the grassroots, not the heavens<sup>14 15</sup>.

Having established the historical significance of the AKP's 2002 victory, and how it built on this in 2007, it is time to take a closer look at what the party is, at its declared manifesto, its political identity and its political agenda. We should keep in mind that this is, after all, the first Turkish political party which has been able to form a majority government since the end of the Cold War.

### The Justice and Development Party

The Justice and Development Party was established by Recep Tayep Erdogan on August 14, 2001; the initial 74 founding members did not include any parliamentarians from the AKP's forerunner, the Virtue Party<sup>16 17</sup>. Yaser Yageesh, the AKP's vice director for external affairs, has his own explanation of how the beginning played out:

<sup>11</sup> Marco, Jan, *op. cit.*, p. 12

<sup>12</sup> Shoubaki, Omar, *op. cit.*, p. 92

<sup>13</sup> Youzraslan, Hamid, *A Modern History of Turkey*, translated into Arabic by Hussein Omar, (in Arabic), (The Arab Cultural Centre, Casablanca), 2010, p. 139

<sup>14</sup> Hudaibi, Ibrahim, "Erdogan and the Muslim Brotherhood", in *Points of View*, (in Arabic), Volume 107, December, 2007, p. 21

<sup>15</sup> Marco, Jan, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-25

<sup>16</sup> Doran, Ragheb, "The Reasons Behind the Rise of the Turkish Model" in Dakheel (ed), *op. cit.*, p. 121

*“A deeper understanding of how we came to prominence in Turkey requires taking a look at how the Party was formed. Most of the founding members were members of the Welfare Party led by Necmeddine Erbakan. Some of them – including Abdullah Gul, Bulent Arinc and Recep Tayyip Erdogan – tried to reform Erbakan’s policies from within. They were particularly displeased with his insistence that every position his party took should be based on [Islam]. We are, after all, in a secular country, and that sort of thing is inappropriate. Once the Welfare Party was disbanded, both Erbakan and those who tried to reform him – including Gul—had moved to the Virtue Party until that party, too, was disbanded by Turkey’s Constitutional Court. Then came the breaking point: Erbakan and his following formed the Felicity Party under the leadership of Rajae Qutan, and the reformers formed the AKP. They had come to a fork in the road, and political realities had changed: there needed to be a break with the Virtue and Welfare Parties. This would not mean, however, denying the past or denying Turkish identity.”*

Yageesh continues:

*“We studied public opinion very closely before we launched. We extensively surveyed people’s opinions to come to an understanding about their needs: what were their priorities? What kind of political party would they accept? We went so far as to ask them about appropriate names and slogans which they could use. Erdogan, as head of the party, also contributed much to the AKP, bringing much of successful experience as mayor of Istanbul. The disputes with Erbakan and other conservatives which gave birth to the AKP were a result of the way in which the conservatives had moved themselves away from the secularism which is the hallmark of our system. Unlike the Felicity Party, we are not promoting the creation of a religious state. We formed a totally new party, but at the same time we are sensitive to the realities surrounding us: there is no way to change the fact that 99% of the people of this country are Muslim, and many of them are conservative.”<sup>18</sup>*

The AKP had to reinvent itself ideologically and politically, in a manner which would allow it to be in harmony with the facts of the Turkish state, including both its domestic reality and its foreign affairs<sup>19</sup>. It does not identify itself as an Islamic party and in fact goes to some lengths to avoid any misconception of it as a party with an Islamist agenda<sup>20</sup>. The AKP recognizes and accepts secularism or, rather, “the secular system”, as a pre-condition to democracy and freedom. The AKP defines this system as “the neutrality of the state with regard to any form of religious belief or philosophical conviction”<sup>21</sup>. This new identity allowed the AKP to brand itself as a center-right party, along the same lines as conservative European political parties<sup>22</sup>. This broadened its appeal, enabling it to attract support from members of other parties on the right of the political spectrum – for example the Motherland Party and True Path Party – as well as

<sup>17</sup> Hassan, Yasser Ahmed, *op. id.*, p. 195

<sup>18</sup> Ghazali, Abdulhalim, *The New Islamists and Secular Fundamentalists in Turkey: The Silent Revolution*, (in Arabic), Shurooq International Press, 2007, pp. 25-26

<sup>19</sup> Shoubaki, Omar, *op. id.*, p. 91

<sup>20</sup> Hroub, Khaled, “Turkey: Islamic/Secular”, in *Points of View*, (in Arabic) No. 117, October, 2008, p. 6

<sup>21</sup> Fuller, Graham, *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a Pivotal Power in the Muslim World*, United States Institute of Peace Press, Washington, DC, 2008

<sup>22</sup> Shoubaki, *op. id.*, p. 91



technocrats, university graduates and professional civil servants who had worked in local government municipalities which were once ruled by Islamists. To these were added the petit bourgeoisie, whether in Istanbul and other big cities or in the Anatolian hinterland, the traditional power base of the Islamists<sup>23</sup>. Yet the AKP also counted within its ranks a number of actors, artists, journalists and intellectuals<sup>24</sup>.

This is where the AKP's composition comes to life: it is not a fully center-right party like Motherland or True Path; nor is it Kemalist in the sense of those center-left groups such as the Republican People's Party or the Democratic Left Party; nor is it Islamist like the Felicity Party. The AKP is, instead, a party which represents an amalgamation of left, right and Islamist all at the same time<sup>25</sup>. The party's founders call its ideology "Conservative Democracy", a sort of consensual system which blends tradition with modernity, and human values with rationalism. The AKP treads a fine line between the old and the new, prioritizes respect for the individual, and rejects political discourse based on meaningless and exclusive dualities along the lines of race, ideology or religion. As far as the AKP is concerned, the state need only ensure that all of its citizens have an environment in which they can live peacefully and fruitfully, without fear of polarization or agitation<sup>26</sup>. This branding is also seen in its insignia: the logo of the party is an electric light bulb colored in white, yellow and orange. The party's supporters also call it "AKPARTI", a word which means "white" in Turkish, a reference to the AKP's reputation for being above reproach when it comes to corruption<sup>27</sup>.

The AKP took seriously the results of the broad surveys mentioned earlier when putting its manifesto together. The underlying assumption is that none of Turkey's problems are intractable. This optimistic worldview springs from faith in Turkey's natural wealth, including not only its underground natural resources but also its youthful population and rich political traditions, and from a conviction that Turkey's geo-strategic position will also make it easier for the country to play a pivotal role in the politics of the wider region. In the AKP's view, it is Turkey's complex national identity, founded on a devotion to religious principles, and its natural beauty that have attracted the tourism that has played a role in invigorating the economy. This bucolically pleasant image of Turkey, promoted through the AKP manifesto, has found wide public support<sup>28</sup>.

The AKP's manifesto sets out the party's goals and objectives as follows:

- 1) Establishing total sovereignty for the people of Turkey within the borders of the nation-state of Turkey, in a state which protects individual liberties as well as national institutions;
- 2) Protecting the territorial integrity of Turkey;

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<sup>23</sup> Hroub, *op. id.*, p. 6

<sup>24</sup> Shoubaki, *op. id.*, p. 95

<sup>25</sup> Habib, Kemal, *Religion and State in Contemporary Turkey: The Conflict between Islam and Secularism*, (in Arabic), Jazirat al Ward Press, Cairo, 2010, p. 360

<sup>26</sup> Habib, Kemal, "Turkish Islamists: From the Margins to the Forefront", in Abdelati, *op. id.*, p. 116

<sup>27</sup> Doran, Ragheb, *op. id.*, p.121

<sup>28</sup> Based on the English version of the AKP website: [http:// eng.akparti.org.tr/ english/partyprogramme.html](http://eng.akparti.org.tr/english/partyprogramme.html)

- 3) The preservation of the Turkish people's moral and ethical values;
- 4) Building Turkey into a modern, contemporary society, in line with the vision of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk;
- 5) Securing prosperity, security and stability for the people of Turkey;
- 6) Realizing the ideal of a social welfare state which would allow people to live in dignity; and,
- 7) Achieving greater social justice and an equitable distribution of the nation's wealth.

The same manifesto goes on to spell out the means to achieve these goals:

- 1) A campaign to spread awareness of the rights of the individual within the state;
- 2) Empowering the neglected sections of Turkey's population to become more productive;
- 3) Driving down unemployment and improving wealth redistribution;
- 4) Implementing policies which enhance the level of management in public administration roles;
- 5) Involving citizens and civil society organizations in the political decision-making process;
- 6) Working to enhance accountability in all areas of public life; and,
- 7) Implementing policies which benefit the nation economically, culturally and educationally, and making improvements to the country's agriculture and foreign policies<sup>29</sup>.

In its domestic agenda, the AKP insists that it does not discriminate along ethnic, religious or sectarian lines, and that the party would not tolerate any challenges to democracy based on these. Preservation of personal liberties and fundamental rights are pre-requisites to a truly free national will, in this view; the same is also true of the party's approaches to women's rights and to the freedom of expression. The AKP also believes that the nation-state should provide the environment for a healthy market, and should end any barriers to a better distribution of national income. And to emphasize its non-corrupt image, the AKP speaks of the importance of "the Rule of Law as opposed to the Law of the Ruler.

As part of its pursuit of these ideals, the AKP has undertaken to promote public confidence in the judicial system. The party also plans to bring about a new constitution in a way that responds to societal needs. The AKP approach to democracy is based on its idea of liberty: it is a system of ensuring that no group of citizens overpowers another.<sup>30</sup>

What is interesting in all of the above about the AKP's manifesto is that it wants nothing to do with identity politics; it focuses, instead, on questions of public services. This was a noticeable break with the previous traditions of Islamist parties in Turkey; in the past, these groups were mired in questions of identity politics before the AKP introduced new concerns for social and

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<sup>29</sup> Ghazali, *op. id.*, pp. 26-27

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 27-29

economic services. This stance, besides helping the AKP in terms of avoiding political infighting, also helped them draw in large groups of new supporters who voted for the party for pragmatic reasons<sup>31</sup>. Having won in multiple consecutive parliamentary elections is proof that their message has been convincing.

## Internal reform in Turkey

The beginning of AKP rule in 2002 ushered in a period of unprecedented political reform in Turkey. Some observers have referred to these changes as a “silent revolution” which has also seen Turkey’s profile grow in its regional environment. Some of the most important changes are discussed below.

### 1. Economic reforms

The economic crisis which had gripped Turkey on the eve of the AKP’s rise to power shaped the beginning of the party’s rule. The AKP began its work by making amendments to the proposals made by the IMF. One example was that the AKP continued to allow public involvement in the private sector and it also insisted on continuing to use a fixed exchange rate system, with the proviso that it might reconsider this. In a society where the majority of the population is young, the AKP made it a top priority to ensure that domestic investment reached 30% of GDP. Some of the steps which they outlined were as follows:

- 1) Increased austerity measures and a reduction in public spending;
- 2) Allowing for foreign direct investment;
- 3) Making provisions for the long-term availability of energy at competitive rates;
- 4) Reforming vocational education to end the long-term shortage of skilled labor, together with an improvement of the labor market; and,
- 5) Reforming the civil service with improved transparency, accountability and monitoring in mind<sup>32</sup>.

The AKP government also tackled high-level corruption inside state bodies. The most high-profile developments in this regard were the indictments of former prime ministers **Tansu Ciller and Mesut Yilmaz**, pointing to the seriousness of the authorities’ efforts<sup>33</sup>. There was also a massive sell-off of assets which the AKP decided were not needed: after the number of ministries was reduced, thousands of cars and “grace and favor” luxury villas used by parliamentarians were sold off. They also formed a number of parliamentary committees to track those responsible for fraud and corruption in public sector banks. In addition, the AKP passed legislation aimed at allowing the government to appropriate any assets from bank managers involved in corruption and their relatives<sup>34</sup>, with said assets to be turned over to the Treasury.

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<sup>31</sup> Hroub, *op. id.*, p. 6

<sup>32</sup> Ozturk, Ibrahim, *op. id.*, pp. 49-52

<sup>33</sup> Kaood, Hilmi Mohammed, "Deliver us From Evil: 555 Years of Istanbul", *Points of View*, No. 117, (in Arabic), October, 2007, p. 14

<sup>34</sup> Hamami, Hisham, "The New Turkey", in *Points of View*, (in Arabic), No. 105, October, 2007, p. 31

The AKP also tried to increase economic productivity, working to promote the building of new factories and other businesses with an export focus, efforts which went a long way to reducing youth unemployment<sup>35</sup>. Some of the AKP's achievements over the past eight years can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The scale of Turkish economic production expanded from \$220 billion in 2002 to \$618 billion in 2009;
- 2) In per capita terms, this has meant that average individual income went from \$3,500 in 2002 per annum to \$8,590 in 2009;
- 3) In terms of annual growth, this was equivalent to a yearly rate of 6.1%. This took the size of the economy from being the 26<sup>th</sup> largest in the world to the 17<sup>th</sup>, thus making Turkey a member of the G-20. It also made Turkey the sixth largest economy in Europe;
- 4) During that time, the scale of Turkish IMF loans was reduced from \$23.5 billion in 2002 to \$6.8 billion in 2009;
- 5) The Turkish Lira was successfully revalued;
- 6) Annual inflation also fell in the period from 2002 to 2009, from 30% to single-digit figures for the present period;
- 7) Turkish exports, which stood at \$36 billion in 2002, rose to \$102 billion in 2009;
- 8) The construction sector is now second only to the Chinese in terms of value; Turkish construction projects were valued at \$23.6 billion in 2009, compared to \$1.5 billion in 2002;
- 9) While inflation remained stable, the average income of wage earners in Turkey rose 188% during the first term of the AKP;
- 10) Foreign currency reserves held by the Turkish Central Bank have risen to \$70.1 billion, compared to \$26.8 billion seven years earlier;
- 11) During that same period, Turkish banks were able to increase lending to business owners from 154 million Turkish Liras in 2002 to TL 3.3 billion in 2009;
- 12) Incentives and inducements provided to livestock owners have more than tripled in value during this time, reaching TL 5.81 billion;
- 13) Public sector banks, which had previously recorded losses, started to announce profits. The agricultural bank alone posted profits of TL 3.51 billion at the end of 2009; and,
- 14) Public debt has continually decreased during the AKP years. At the end of 2007, it had reached 29.1%, compared to 61.4% in 2002<sup>36</sup>.

Perhaps the most telling indicator of this vast economic success is that Turkey is the first non-oil-exporting Middle Eastern country to move from the club of aid recipient to donor nation<sup>37</sup>. With these government achievements behind it, it was possible for Turkey to attract foreign investment, which grew tenfold from 2002 to 2005, reaching \$10 billion. This was also reflected

<sup>35</sup> Kaood, Hilmi Mohammed, *op. id.*, p. 14

<sup>36</sup> Islir, Amrullah, "Changes in Turkey Over the Past Eight Years", on the following link: <http://www.mesc.com.jo/Activities/lecture/lecture1.html>

<sup>37</sup> Sider, Farhad "Regional Neo-Ottomanism and the Arab World", in *The Past and Present of Turkish-Arab Relations*, (in Arabic), Jordan University Press - Faculty of International Studies, Amman, Jordan, 2010, p. 47

in the near-quintupling of the number of foreign firms operating in Turkey, from 5,000 in 2001 to 24,000 in the present. These investments were facilitated by the creation of a governmental investment authority in 2006, which itself was responsible for finding places for \$22 billion worth of investment. Of course, Turkey's proximity to the markets of Africa, Asia and Europe also play an important role here.

**Healthcare:**

- 1) The Ministry of Health's budget was TL 3.91 billion in 2002, rising to TL 13.4 billion TL in 2010;
- 2) Before the AKP came to power, patients had to pay for ambulance costs, many could not find treatment in emergency rooms for one reason or another, and others were detained at hospitals for not being able to pay. Today, all those who need emergency treatment receive it for free, including in privately owned hospitals. The Health Ministry also has use of two airplane ambulances and 17 helicopter ambulances, all of which, like regular ambulance services, are covered for free;
- 3) Between 2002 and 2009, Turkey saw the construction and completion of 251 hospitals and 1,028 clinics, compared to 139 hospitals and 617 clinics during the period from 1996 to 2002;
- 4) In 2010, the Health Ministry rolled out a Family Doctor Program in all Turkish cities. For the first time, Turkish citizens have the ability to consult with their own doctors, who are aware of their own medical history, and at any time;
- 5) Hospital wards used to be over-crowded before the rise of the AKP, with five or six patients to a room, often without a toilet. New hospital wards have no more than two beds per room, with a toilet in each room, refrigerator, a TV set, and a spare bed for any patient's chaperone;
- 6) Clinics and pharmacies at all hospitals are open to the entire population; and,
- 7) Since 2002, the Ministry of Health has taken measures to improve the lives of those suffering from kidney failure. It now provides cars to transport them to and from their dialysis treatments. The number of dialysis machines countrywide has also nearly tripled, going from 5,685 to 14,053.

**Education:**

Under the AKP, the Ministry of Education's budget has, for the first time, surpassed that of the Defense Ministry. The country has used these funds to:

- 1) The budget of the Ministry of Education became the largest budget in the current government, exceeded the budget of the Ministry of Defense;
- 2) Build 150,000 new classrooms;
- 3) Equip schools with 751,830 new computers, and 29,428 dedicated IT rooms;
- 4) Provide all school textbooks free of charge to all students since 2003;



- 5) Increase the number of universities between 2002 and 2010, with the construction of 49 state-sector universities and 29 private ones. This compares to 53 state-sector universities and 23 private sector universities before the rise of the AKP; and,
- 6) The government has also constructed spaces for 64,333 students in 153 university dormitories.

**Transportation:**

- 1) Before 2003, dual-lane highways covered a total of 6,101 kilometers in Turkey. The present government was able to build 13,073 kilometers of similar roads in a matter of eight years. In other words, the present government had built double the length of roads which were present before its rise to power. In addition, the government paved 77,092 kilometers of roads between rural villages;
- 2) Between 1951 and 2002, Turkey added 945 kilometers of railroad tracks to the country. In the eight years of AKP rule, however, the authorities were able to construct 1,076 kilometers of additional railroads;
- 3) Also in terms of rail transport, high-speed trains now connect the capital, Ankara, and Eskisehir. Work is commencing on an additional link between Eskisehir and Istanbul. Once this link is complete, the trains will complete the 200 kilometers from Istanbul to Eskisehir in only three hours. These are in addition to a number of other high-speed rail links which are being built, such as those between Ankara and Sivas and between Ankara and Konya;
- 4) In terms of international rail links, the government is working to complete the Silk Road rail line linking Eastern Turkey to Tblisi, Georgia and Baku, Azerbaijan. The government is also working on the epochal “Marmara Project”, a rail link to connect Europe with Asia, at an accelerated rate;
- 5) Domestic air traffic has also increased dramatically, rising from 8,729 passenger-flights in 2002 to 41,227 passenger-flights in 2009. This reflects a similar situation in terms of international flights, where the number of passengers nearly doubled from 25,000 to 44,000 during the same seven years; and,
- 6) The AKP government built 70 shipyards from 2003 to 2010, adding to the 37 shipyards which existed before its term, while work continues on a further 59.

**Natural gas:**

- 1) The domestic natural gas grid was extended between 2003 and 2009 to reach a total of 66 cities, compared to the nine which it used to serve before; and
- 2) There are also plans to extend that network to another 15 cities by the end of 2012.

**Agriculture:**

- 1) The value of Turkish agricultural exports increased from \$4 billion to \$11.2 billion between 2002 and 2009;
- 2) This contributed to an increase in the overall contribution of agriculture to Gross Domestic Product, from TL 36 billion to TL 78.4 billion in the same time frame; and

- 3) This can be traced to a spike in the level of incentives given to agriculture, going from TL 1.87 billion to TL 5.7 billion between 2002 and 2010.

#### **Industry:**

- 1) Over its eight years of rule over Turkey, the number of organized Industrial Zones went from 70 to 142; and
- 2) This is in addition to a further 83 small industrial parks in the same time.

#### **Archeology and Cultural Heritage:**

- 1) The budget of the Islamic Heritage Trusts has increased from TL 37 million in 2002 to TL 460 million in 2010;
- 2) At the same time, the government managed to help restore 3,484 cultural sites from 2003 to 2010, compared to only 46 which were restored between 1998 and 2002;
- 3) 12 million historical documents have been stored in electronic archives; and
- 4) This has allowed the state authorities to more than double the number of registered cultural artifacts, with the number of these going from 9,483 before 2003 to 20,078 in 2010<sup>38</sup>.

#### ***Closing statement on the economic achievements of the AKP***

In view of the above, the achievements of the AKP during its time in power can be compared to those of the governments of Japan and Germany following World War II. In both of those cases, the countries' authorities were able to exploit the conditions of the Cold War to benefit their own domestic economies. In a similar vein, Turkey has been able to make use of its nominee status in the European Union for its own economic ends. With all of these, Turkey has become the sixth largest economy in Europe, and the largest economy within the Organization of the Islamic Conference. And all of this has been achieved despite the fact that Turkey lacks any real natural resources by way of petroleum or natural gas.

## **2. Constitutional reforms**

The AKP government went ahead with a political reform program, offering amendments to the constitution in a bid to "strengthen democracy". The proposed amendments included:

- 1) The term of the Turkish Parliament has been shortened from five to four years;
- 2) The electorate for the presidency is to be expanded to include all voters above 40 years of age who hold an advanced university degree;
- 3) A president's term is to be limited to five years as opposed to seven, with a president being able to serve only two terms<sup>39</sup>;
- 4) The size of the Constitutional Court is to be increased from 11 to 17 persons, who are to be selected by the Parliament, as opposed to appointment by the military.

<sup>38</sup> Isler, Amrallah, *op. id.*

<sup>39</sup> Bakir, Ali Hussein, "Turkey: State, Society and Geopolitical and Geostrategic Assets: A Regional Model Rising to the Global Level", in Abdelatti, *op. id.*, pp. 32-33

- 5) The Higher Judicial Assembly would also be increased in size, from seven to 22 members, who are to be selected in the same way.<sup>40</sup>

### 3. Reforms of personal freedom laws

The AKP government's political reform program also included changes designed to "strengthen civil liberties". Some of the moves which the AKP has made include:

- 1) Ending the Emergency Laws in the country's southeast, scene of the Kurdish insurrection<sup>41</sup>;
- 2) Permitting non-Turkish ethnic minorities to use and learn their own languages, which has allowed for the broadcast of television programs in Kurdish;
- 3) Issuing a general amnesty for "penitent" former members of the PKK;
- 4) Anti-torture regulations have been strengthened, making the jail terms for torturers more severe;
- 5) A liberalization of the laws governing political protests and gatherings, and enshrining personal liberty and the right to organization, as well as a freedom-of-information law;
- 6) The cancellation of previous "black lists" which arbitrarily barred some citizens from leaving the country. Any such measures would have to be judicially approved in the future<sup>42</sup>;
- 7) Civilians were no longer tried in military courts except in cases of war;
- 8) An amendment to empower women through a policy of affirmative action;
- 9) A loosening of the regulations surrounding the right to labor organization and the right to strike, as one aspect of economic rights;
- 10) The formation of special juvenile courts, and the end of adult trials for minors accused of organized crime or terrorism<sup>43</sup>;
- 11) Abolishing the death penalty and the State Security Courts;
- 12) Abolishing laws which allow the authorities to control the media or to appropriate media-related materials; and,
- 13) The ratification of all international treaties which seek to protect individual human rights, and giving them precedence over domestic laws in the event of any conflict<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Dalli, Khourshid, "Turkey after referendum: the constitution and the election battle" on the following link:

<http://www.wahdaislamyia.org/issues/106/kdali.htm>

<sup>41</sup> Isler, Amrallah, *op. id.*

<sup>42</sup> Taghian, Sherif, *Sheikh-President Recep Tayeb Erdogan: The Muezzin of Istanbul and the Vanquisher of Kemalist Idolatry*, (in Arabic), Arab Book Publishers, Cairo-Damascus, 2010, p. 100

<sup>43</sup> Dalli, Khourshid, *op. id.*

<sup>44</sup> Bakir, Ali Hussein, *op. id.*, p. 32

## Reforms to the military establishment

The military, too, came in for its share of reform. In order to fully understand the true meaning of these reforms for the way in which the military is run, it is important to consider the role which the military played in Turkish politics before the AKP came to power in November 2002. In contrast to the historical arc followed in Western societies, where the nation and the army go hand-in-hand, the military was seen as the guarantor of a unitary identity of the Turkish Republic<sup>45</sup>. The Turkish military went to work early on to protect its own status within the regime through a number of constitutional instruments which permitted it to play a role in the nation's politics; even during the rule of civilian governments, the military had a role to play.

Following the end of the one-party state in 1945, the armed forces' influence was diminished during the rule of Prime Minister Adnan Menderes in the 1950s. This drove the military to direct intervention in affairs of state through a military coup d'état in 1960. Before leaving power, the generals institutionalized their role in the decision-making process by establishing the National Security Council, which was constitutionally mandated in the 1961 Constitution<sup>46</sup>.

This council, which is headed by the president during its monthly meetings, includes the prime minister, the defense minister, and the interior minister, as well as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the heads of the various military and quasi-military apparatuses: the army, air force, navy and gendarmerie<sup>47</sup>. The council enjoys a secretariat with a staff of 700, which is headed by a general selected by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In practical terms, the council has a wide swathe of authority in all facets of Turkish political life, including the right to collect information covering all governmental bodies as well as the authority to "preserve national security interests"<sup>48</sup>. It is also the case that the council, and not the minister of defense, enjoys the freedom to plan and implement military actions<sup>49</sup>. In this regard, the National Security Council has overtaken the role of the cabinet, reserving for itself the right of a unilateral, unexplained veto. Although being technically a "consultative" body, it has simply not happened that the government has, at any time, contradicted the wishes of the council<sup>50</sup>. After all, it was the military establishment itself which drafted Article 35 of the Constitution, which authorizes the generals to step in and take power "in the event that democracy and the constitution are threatened"<sup>51</sup>. It is under this pretext of defending democracy that the army has undertaken three

<sup>45</sup> Salem, Salah, *Transformation in Identity and Turkish-Arab Relations*, (in Arabic), Hajr Printing Press, Giza (Cairo), 1999, p. 24

<sup>46</sup> Nouredine, Mohammed, *Turkey, the Confused Republic: Approaches in Religion, Politics and Foreign Affairs* (in Arabic), Beirut: Center for Strategic Studies Research and Documentation, 1998, pp 84-85.

<sup>47</sup> Salama, Moataz Mohammed, "The Army and Politics in Turkey", in *International Politics* (in Arabic), Vol 131, January, 1998, p. 124

<sup>48</sup> Hamami, Hisham, *op. id.*, p. 29

<sup>49</sup> Oglu, Ali Bayram, "The Army and Power in Turkey", in *Turkish-Arab Dialogue from Past to Present*, (in Arabic), (ed) Arab Unity Studies Centre, Beirut, 2010

<sup>50</sup> Salama, Moataz Mohammed, *op. id.*, p. 124

<sup>51</sup> Nouredine, Mohammed, *op. id.*, p. 85

coups d'état: in 1971, 1980 and 1997<sup>52 53</sup>. The generals used these incidents to entrench themselves within the National Security Council, and thus demonstrate to the world that they control the political regime of Turkey, and not the other way around<sup>54 55</sup>.

Yet when the AKP came to power, it felt the need to implement far-reaching reforms in the military establishment if Turkey were ever to become a member of the EU. The reforms they proposed included:

- 1) The amending of Article 1 of the National Security Council Law, in order to turn it into a truly advisory body subject to the rulings of the cabinet, and only in accordance with the mandate it is given by the cabinet;
- 2) The amendment of Article 5 of the same law, making the meetings of the council bi-monthly as opposed to monthly;
- 3) Article 13 of the same law was also changed to strip the council's secretariat of its oversight and monitoring roles over government ministries and institutions;
- 4) Canceling the provision in Article 15 of the National Security Council Law which had reserved the post of Secretary General of the council to a member of the armed forces with the rank of lieutenant colonel or above. This position is now open to all Turkish citizens; the first civilian to fill the role, Mohammed Albucan, was appointed in August 2004;
- 5) Amending Article 30 of the law governing the Audit Bureau, in order to make military institutions subject to governmental audits, in line with all other state bodies. Committees made up of the Parliament and the Ministry of Finance have, for the first time, also been given the authority to monitor the expenditures of the military, which previously had been considered state secrets<sup>56</sup>;
- 6) Amendment of Article 131 of the law governing the Higher Education Council, thus removing the stipulation that a seat be reserved for a general appointed by the military. A similar measure was taken for the body governing the actions of the radio and television union. For the first time, these two bodies have become fully civilian;
- 7) Further legal adjustments have made military officers liable to judicial prosecutions in of corruption cases<sup>57</sup>;
- 8) The setting up of committees within the National Security Council to audit the military establishment spending. This matter was not allowed previously, while keeping some articles secrets as they are considered state's secrets<sup>58</sup>; and,
- 9) Civilian courts have also been deemed to have jurisdiction over all military officers, including the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff<sup>59</sup>.

<sup>52</sup> Hamami, Hisham, *op. id.*, p. 29

<sup>53</sup> Salama, Moataz Mohammed, *ibid*, p. 124

<sup>54</sup> Abdeljalil, Tarek, *The Army and Political Life: Dismantling of the Iron Grip, in Turkey: Domestic Challenges and Foreign Stakes*, Mohammed Abdelatti, *op. id.*, p. 79.

<sup>55</sup> Hroub, Khaled, *op. id.*, p. 11.

<sup>56</sup> Hamami, Hisham, *ibid*, p. 29

<sup>57</sup> Abdeljalil, Tarek, *op. id.*, pp 79-81

<sup>58</sup> Hamami, Hisham, *op. id.*, p.29



Despite all of these changes, it cannot be said that the era of military interventions in Turkey's political affairs has ended; the right of the military to do so is guaranteed by the 1982 constitution, which remains valid, in situations where the republic is at stake. It is in this light that we must see the AKP's plans to bring about a new constitution, which would finally put the Turkish military in its rightful place within a modern democracy<sup>60</sup>. The lure of European Union membership has been a great incentive to Turkey's AKP government in this regard as in all other reform measures<sup>61 62</sup>. In order to meet membership requirements, the Turks will have to fulfill stipulations set out in two categories (the "Copenhagen Criteria"):

In the **political field**, these are:

- The presence of representative democracy;
- The presence of the rule of the law, and an end to all vehicles of oppression;
- Respect for human rights and ending all laws which contradict these rights; and,
- Respect for the rights of all minorities, and allowing those minorities their right to cultural expression within the framework of the state.

In the **economic field**, these are:

- The presence of a functioning market economy;
- Harmonization of the banking and finance sector to meet the requirements of those used in Europe;
- The reform of all public sector bodies to meet the standards set by the European Union.
- The presence of a local market which is robust enough to withstand liberalization with Europe; and,
- Fighting corruption and bribery within state bodies<sup>63</sup>.

These two sets of criteria have broadly corresponded with the strategic agenda of the AKP during its years in power. In terms of domestic politics, the AKP was waiting for an excuse to limit the military's power<sup>64 65</sup>. On the diplomatic front, these all served the age-old quest of EU membership<sup>66</sup>.

## What remains to be done

Despite the fast pace and immense breadth of reforms undertaken by the AKP, there remain some issues to which attention needs to be paid. Some of the most important of these issues include:

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<sup>59</sup> Dalli, Khourshid, *op. id.*,

<sup>60</sup> Abdeljalil, Tarek, *op. id.*, pp. 83-84

<sup>61</sup> Keder, Tchagler, "From the Reins of the Army to the Constraints of Brussels: The Rise the New Turkey", *Points of View*, (in Arabic), Volume 70, p. 18, November, 2004,

<sup>62</sup> Fuller, Graham, "The Model", *Points of View*, Volume 70, (in Arabic), p. 22, November, 2004

<sup>63</sup> Ghanem, Ibrahim al Bayumi, "The Discourse of Attraction and Repulsion in Turkish-European Relations", in *Turkey: Domestic Challenges and Foreign Stakes*, Mohammed Abdelatti *op. id.*, p. 177

<sup>64</sup> Hroub, Khaled, *op. id.*, p. 10

<sup>65</sup> Kaood, Mohammed Hilmi, *op. id.*, p. 14

<sup>66</sup> Ghureiri, Mohammed Yas, *op. id.*, p. 260

## 1. The hijab question

The issue of the hijab in Turkey dates to the foundation of the republic, with the hijab itself being banned in November 1925<sup>67</sup> <sup>68</sup>. It became an explosive political issue with the coup d'état led by General Kenan Evren on 12 September 1980, after which women who wore the hijab were forbidden from enrolling in universities, technical colleges, schools and other state institutions. Many of these young women were then forced to complete their studies abroad, going as far afield as the United States and Canada, but others in Germany, the Netherlands, or Hungary. More recently, some have studied in Syria, Egypt or Lebanon. Daughters of some of the AKP's highest leaders have been among this group, including Erdogan's, who went to university in the United States. It is worth noting that while the US has no ban against wearing the hijab at university, the same is not true of Turkey, a country where 99% of the population is Muslim. A number of similar anecdotes tell sad stories about Turkish women who wear the hijab in their institutions.

One of these students was **Nusseibeh Bolaigy**, the first woman to wear the hijab while studying at university, who began her studies in 1966. She would soon be expelled from that university, however, and have her citizenship revoked by the decree of then-President **Suleyman Demirel** in May 1999<sup>69</sup>. In that same month, however, a woman MP by the name of **Marwa Kaoukji** insisted on wearing her hijab to the opening session of Parliament<sup>70</sup>.

It was Erdogan who said, while on a visit to Spain in January 2008: "Supposing the hijab is a political symbol. Do we then ban it? How do you go about banning symbols?"<sup>71</sup> It was shortly after that statement that President **Abdullah Gul** endorsed legislation which permitted the wearing of hijab in Turkish universities, after the bill had passed the Parliament with the votes of 411 out of 550 delegates<sup>72</sup>. This did not stop the state prosecutor, however, from trying to have the AKP banned through the Supreme Court on the grounds that the party was seeking to "change the secular nature of the state". While the court did not agree to ban the AKP in the end, it did issue a strongly worded warning, and thus did the AKP narrowly escape the fate of other Islamist-based groups such as the Prosperity Party<sup>73</sup>. It does seem that the AKP learned its lesson, for the issue of the hijab did not appear among the constitutional reforms which were billed for a referendum in September of 2010.

<sup>67</sup> Dalli, Khourshid, "Turkey and the Battle for the Hijab", Following link:  
<http://www.wahdaislamyia.org/issues/107/kdalli.htm>

<sup>68</sup> Noufal, Michele, *The Return of Turkey to the Eastern Fold: New Trends in Turkish Politics*, Arab Scientific Publishing, Beirut, 2010, p. 113

<sup>69</sup> Dalli, Khourshid, "Turkey and the Battle for the Hijab", *op. id.*

<sup>70</sup> Tayyar, Khalil Ibrahim, "The Conflict between Islam and Secularism in Turkey", in *Strategic Studies*, (in Arabic), Vol. 99, UAE Centre for Strategic Studies, Abu Dhabi, pp. 63-64

<sup>71</sup> Oglu, Adib Assaf Bakr, in Abdelatti, *op.ed.* p. 129

<sup>72</sup> Dalli, Khourshid, "Turkey and the Battle for the Hijab", *op. id.*

<sup>73</sup> Oglu, Adib Assaf Bakr, *op. id.*, p. 130

## 2. The Kurdish question

The question of the Kurdish minority is one of the main themes which have remained with the republic since its inception. During the early years of 1925 to 1938, the Kurds had staged 17 insurrections with the aim of securing their independence from the new, secular and unitary republic. This crisis began to develop into a security issue during the 1980s, with the rise of the PKK<sup>74</sup>. The Kurds represent about 20% of the total population of Turkey, or between 12 and 13 million people. While they are concentrated in provinces in the east of the country, many Kurds also live in large cities in the West, especially in Istanbul and Ankara. In Istanbul alone, there are an estimated three to four million of them<sup>75</sup>.

The victories of the AKP at the ballot box in 2002 and 2007 allowed for a fundamental re-evaluation of the principles on which the republic was built. It was during this introspection that Erdogan, on one of his many visits to the historically Kurdish city of Diyarbakir, said:

“The cause of the Kurds in this country is the cause of democracy; I champion this cause, and shall solve in peacefully.”

There followed an earnest attempt at greater openness for Turkey's Kurds, which saw certain measures such as the lifting of martial law in Kurdish areas, and permission for the Kurds to use their own language in the media, subject to certain caveats. Together with an increased interest in the development of Kurdish areas, these laid the ground for what became known as the “Kurdish Spring”, as it was then called by the prime minister, before that title itself was changed and the phenomenon was called the “Democratic Spring”. The government's plans for the Kurdish Spring seemed to suggest its view that this problem would only be resolved through economic, social and developmental efforts; the overall aim was to strengthen Turkey in general, both within its borders and abroad. Resolving the Kurdish issue would certainly give the state greater legitimacy in the eyes of its own citizens, as well as promote communal harmony among all of Turkey's groups. Of course, resolution of the issue would also serve Turkey's plans to join the EU<sup>76</sup>.

All of these advances notwithstanding, Turkey's Kurds are a long way from achieving the sort of cultural autonomy which the Basques enjoy within the Kingdom of Spain<sup>77</sup>, and extremists from

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<sup>74</sup> Thalgy, Mohammed, “The Identity Crisis of Turkey: New Ways of Looking at Things”, in *Turkey: Domestic Challenges and Foreign Stakes*, Mohammed Abdelatti, *op. id.*, p.97

<sup>75</sup> Mahfouz, Aqil Said, *The Discourse of State and Society in Turkey: The Military Establishment and Politics*, the UAE Centre for Strategic Studies, Abu Dhabi, 2008, p. 79

<sup>76</sup> Dallı, Kourshid, “The Kurdish Issue in Turkey: The Threat of an Escalation of Violence”, [http:// www.wahdaislamia.org./ issues/ 104/ kdalli.htm](http://www.wahdaislamia.org./issues/104/kdalli.htm).

<sup>77</sup> Dallı, Kourshid, “Turkey After the Referendum”, *op.ed.*

within the Kurdish continue to demand complete independence in their own nation-state<sup>78</sup>. Two primary factors impede the resolution of the Kurdish issue.

Firstly, there is no agreed vision for the two parties to the conflict about the shape of an agreement. Turkey speaks of a liberalization without really addressing the fundamental issues of the matter, or deciding exactly who their Kurdish interlocutors would be, knowing full well that the PKK has been branded by their own government, and the governments of many other countries, as a terrorist organization. The PKK, for its part, refuses to articulate specific demands: it mixes and matches between its cultural agenda and self-determination as it sees fit, creating a sense of confusion and ambiguity. This sense of confusion breeds a great foreboding, not only in Turkey but in all the countries in which the Kurds can be found, especially Iran and Syria. Secondly, regional complications play in role in delaying any resolution of the Kurdish problem. It might just be the case that Turkey's international partners prefer to keep things unresolved between Turkey and her Kurdish population<sup>79</sup>.

### 3. The Alawite question

The Lausanne Agreement of 24 July 1923, which drew the final boundaries of the Turkish Republic, had no provisions for the presence of any religious or sectarian minorities within the Islamic community itself<sup>80</sup>. Yet Alawism represents a sectarian minority within Islam. The name itself is a broad term used to describe a number of groups who could otherwise be considered "Shiites", and together they make up between 25 and 30 per cent of Turkey's population<sup>81</sup>.

The Alawites are themselves divided into the main ethnic groups of Turkey: Arabs, Kurds and various Turkic groups, with varying levels of representation within each group<sup>82</sup>. It is widely believed that the biggest group of Alawites are Turks, followed by Kurds. All Alawites, however, faced political, environmental and geographical marginalization during the Ottoman period, given that the Ottoman Empire did not recognize their version of Islam. Discrimination against them remains in place to this day, in terms of labor, public expenditure and services, and administrative positions<sup>83</sup>.

Alawites have been clamoring for some form of redress from this kind of discrimination: they have asked for certain privileges, like the right to build places of worship with state funding, as the Sunnis do. Some Alawite groups also ask that their children not be forced to take religious

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<sup>78</sup> Thalgy, Mohammed, *op.ed.*, p. 98

<sup>79</sup> Dalli, Khoureshid, *The Kurdish Question, op.ed.*

<sup>80</sup> Nouredine, Mohammed, *op.ed.*, p. 51

<sup>81</sup> Mahfouz, Aqil Said, *op.ed.*, p. 71

<sup>82</sup> Nouredine, Mohammed, *op.ed.*, p. 55

<sup>83</sup> Mahfouz, Aqil Said, *op.ed.*, p. 72

studies at school, while others ask that Alawi beliefs become a part of the curriculum. There are also Alawite demands that their community be given a greater number of governmental posts, especially high-ranking administrative appointments, and that these be guaranteed constitutionally<sup>84</sup>. These demands by the Alawites have been met with favor by the European Union, which has gone so far as to make them conditions for Turkey's membership bid<sup>85</sup>. The AKP, on the other hand, has come up with its own set of proposed resolutions to the Alawite problem:

- 1) Recognizing Ashura – a Shiite feast commemorating the death of the Imam Hussein – as a public holiday;
- 2) Placing the spiritual leaders of the Alawites on the public payroll;
- 3) Preparing, by the 2011-2012 academic year, new school religious studies curricula which have a more balanced view of the non-Sunni sects of Islam (at present they teach only the Hanafi School of Sunni Islam);
- 4) The creation of a new optional religious studies course, based mostly on Alawite religious teachings;
- 5) The conversion of the Madimac Hotel in Sifash, Anatolia, site of the massacre of 37 Alawites in July 1993 while they were attending a spiritual retreat, into a public library; and,
- 6) The development of the Haji Bektash area, the seat of the Alawites in Turkey, and the building of a university there to serve the Alawite community.

As for Alawite houses of worship (including mosques), their legal status remains unchanged and they have not been recognized as legal houses of worship. Nor have the proposed changes put forward by the AKP gone without criticism from some Alawite groups, many of which have links to the opposition Republican People's Party<sup>86</sup>, with some claiming that the AKP was merely scheming in a bid to win votes in the 2011 elections.

The picture which emerges from the actions of the two players here – the Alawites on one side and the AKP on the other – is one of a lack of trust between them, all understandable given the bitter history of the Alawite community in the Sunni state. It is perhaps worth recalling that

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<sup>84</sup> Thalgy, Mohammed, *op.ed.*, p. 101

<sup>85</sup> Dalli, Khourshid, *Turkey after the Referendum*, *op.ed.*

<sup>86</sup> "The Alevi Plan to Rule Turkey", see link:  
[http://www.sunni-news.net/ar/articles.aspx?selected\\_article\\_no=15186](http://www.sunni-news.net/ar/articles.aspx?selected_article_no=15186).



while the Alawites were the victims of Ottoman massacres, the AKP and its prime minister boast of their credentials as “the New Ottomans”<sup>87</sup>.

#### 4. Christian minorities

The Lausanne Treaty officially recognized the non-Muslim peoples of Turkey as religious minorities, and this includes the Greek and Armenian populations of the country<sup>88</sup>. This is not to deny the presence of other Christian groups in the country, such as the Georgians, the Assyrians and Christian Arabs; but the Turkish state does not recognize these groups as being religious minorities. The Armenians and the Greeks combined number between 85,000 and 140,000 people, and both communities are centered around Istanbul. While there are small numbers of Protestants and Catholics among the Armenians, the Greeks are essentially all Orthodox<sup>89</sup>.

All of these communities, but the Armenians in particular, make demands on the central government in order to increase their share of parliamentary seats: not a single non-Muslim won in the last parliamentary elections. Representatives of the Armenian community also demand that their language be used in state-sector schools and that they be provided with the facilities to train a new generation of clerics. In addition, they demand that citizens' religious identities not be printed on their identification cards. Perhaps most visibly, they demand that writers and journalists who express opinions contrary to those of the government when it comes to the Armenian genocide be protected from arrest. The death of one of these Turkish citizens of Armenian descent, Hrant Dink, was the subject of a lengthy investigation and report by the International Group for the Protection of Minority Rights in 2007; Dink was killed, presumably because of his position on the Armenian genocide (the authorities have yet to apprehend anybody)<sup>90</sup>. Many representatives of these minority groups claim that there is an unofficial yet deep-seated discrimination against them, particularly in public sector positions and in the military and security services. Of 81 provincial governors in Turkey, not one is a non-Muslim. Other complaints center on the school curricula, which many claim are discriminatory against non-Muslim minorities. Others choose to focus on the types of discrimination found in the street, in unofficial, everyday interactions with other people.

The AKP response to all of this has been marked with cautious liberalism. When a number of Turkish intellectuals penned a public letter, in December 2008, condemning official apathy towards the Armenian genocide, Erdogan's response was frosty: had there really been a genocide, he said, then its culprits and not he or the Turkish state should apologize. Nonetheless,

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<sup>87</sup> Dalli, Khoureshid, Turkey after the Referendum, *op.ed.*

<sup>88</sup> Nouredine, Mohammed, *op.ed.*, p. 51

<sup>89</sup> Mahfouz, Aqil Said, *op.ed.*, pp. 73-87

<sup>90</sup> Thalgy, Mohammed, *op.ed.*, p. 99

Erdogan, both as prime minister and as head of the AKP, helped drive Turkey to a situation where this kind of public petition was even possible<sup>91</sup>.

In the midst of this “opening up” of Turkey came a five-month jail sentence in 2009 for an ethnic Turk who hung a placard which read “Jews and Armenians not Welcome” at the entrance to his workshop. In that same year, Erdogan made a statement condemning the policies which drove out tens of thousands of ethnic Greeks from the country in the previous century, policies which he described as “fascist”. Taken together, this represents a sea-change in attitudes in a country seeking to secure entry to the European Union<sup>92</sup>.

## Conclusion

We can clearly take note of the many achievements of the AKP over the past eight years, politically, socially and economically. Yet the pace of change has not been so rapid when it comes to questions related to identity: the issue of the hijab, the Kurdish question and the dilemmas facing the Christian minorities. In other words, it has not been enough to secure Turkish entrance to the European club.

There need to be solutions to the many problems which the AKP has inherited from previous governments, issues which have remained with the republic for a long time, some dating back to the Ottoman Empire. These include the question of the Kurds and that of the Armenians and other Christian populations, leaving aside the questions which this government itself has put on the table, such as the question of hijab. All of these are difficult issues because no quick fix is available. Any solution would also have to be based on a social consensus. Such a consensus would have been even more difficult in the context of very polarized and polarizing coalition cabinets, with each party placing its own priorities over those of the government as a whole.

The AKP has shown, through its ability to control the levers of power, that it is the most capable of all Turkish political parties at expressing the views of Turkey at the present time. It remains unclear, since the election results, if the party will be able to change the constitution in order to attain the needed results to bring about a more peaceful coexistence among the communities of Turkey for the sake of Turkey itself, first and foremost, before it can move forward with its bid to join the European Union.

This AKP agenda was not born in a vacuum; it was foreshadowed by all of the party’s positions since it took power for the first time in 2002; for the AKP, reform is a gradual process, and needs

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<sup>91</sup> Nouredine, Mohammed, “Apologising to the Armenians”, see link:  
[http:// www.akhbaralaalam.net/ news\\_detail.php?id=18968](http://www.akhbaralaalam.net/news_detail.php?id=18968)

<sup>92</sup> Turkish court sentences a man to five months in jail because he insulted Jews and Armenians:  
[http:// www.akhbaralaalam.net/ news\\_detail.php?id=24690](http://www.akhbaralaalam.net/news_detail.php?id=24690)

to be so, particularly in a country bound by tyrannical, exclusionary, secularist fanatics, and one burdened by a military which meddles in affairs of state<sup>93</sup>.

The present state of Turkey has changed, it has modernized, thanks to the deep, profound efforts made by the AKP, efforts which it made gradually, in a balanced way, in all fields. Turkey is now being born anew, and is coming into a new era. This renewal must go on until the country gains what it deserves by way of functioning political organs which carry out their tasks well<sup>94</sup>. It was only the existing partial democracy which allowed Turkey to come so far in the first place. Possibly for the first time in the contemporary world, we see a Middle Eastern government which actually practices what it is preaching. The increases in popularity and voter base which they have achieved was only made possible because of the promises which they kept.

The question which presents itself is: what keeps Arab governments from getting this bug? We of course should not ask for a carbon copy of the Turkish experience. We do, however, need to learn from them about how to pursue political reforms. Such reforms require a pluralist political system, one in which peaceful handovers of power are possible, and political parties are active in the affairs of state, not just rubberstamps to make the ruler look good.

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<sup>93</sup> Taghyan, Sherif, *op.ed*, p. 139

<sup>94</sup> Kaood, Hilmi Mohammed, *op.ed.*, p. 12

<sup>95</sup> Habib, Kamal, "The Third Republic", *Points of View*, (in Arabic), Volume 105, October, 2007, p 33