Democracy: Forbidden Fruit
Two issues with serious repercussions for the European Union dominate the political agenda in Turkey. First came the crushing election victory of the moderate Islamic politicians who present themselves as ‘Muslim Democrats.’ Then, last month’s Copenhagen summit delivered yet another rebuff at the gates of Europe, tinged with disappointment. Where will this European odyssey take the country and the continent?

On the morning of November 4, once the ballots were cast and counted, the political landscape in Turkey completely altered. Not a single member of the outgoing coalition or any of the main opposition parties could pass the ten percent threshold to take seats in parliament. Dismally defeated and highly disappointed leaders started resigning one after another. The electorate destroyed the familiar pantheon of politics and wiped out a political class that had ruled the country for nearly two decades.

The AK party (Justice and Development) led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan scored a sweeping victory. It had been almost twenty years since a single party had received enough votes to establish a majority government. What made the change even more dramatic was that the party of government was Islamic, if moderate. Not that the results were a reflection of any sudden increase in religious sentiments. So why did this landslide take place?

The election results were first and foremost a consequence of the strong discontent caused by the hardship of two major economic crises in as many years. With a gross domestic product real growth rate of minus 7.4 percent and consumer price inflation of 68.5 percent in 2001, the economy stumbled through one of its worst periods since the Second World War. High levels of unemployment accompanied these dismal economic indicators and spelled political disaster for the parties in power. According to official figures, about half a million people lost their jobs. The bankruptcy of many small and medium size enterprises made the situation worse.

Although the outgoing coalition government made a number of important structural economic changes, the benefits will only be felt in the long run. The public had to shoulder the immediate burden.

The election results were also a reaction to the political and economic instability caused by the fractured political scene and a series of coalition governments that failed to respond to people’s needs and expectations. The inability of the traditional centre right and centre left parties to alter their approach diminished their power. The resulting gap enabled previously marginal parties to move centre stage.

Finally, the results revealed the public’s fatigue with the same old leaders returning over and over again. Hardest hit was the Democratic Left party, whose support dropped radically from twenty two percent in 1999 to a meagre 1.2 percent, partly because of the poor health of its leader, former Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit. This was a clear reflection of public disillusionment with parties’ policies that have been tried and found wanting. It also indicates the desire for new political leaders with vision.
With the modem world. We will prove this. Turkey will be an example for the world. However, the party has to strike a balance between the different factions, some of which are very conservative. If Islam and democratic ideals can be successfully reconciled, and the party lives up to the public's cautiously optimistic expectations, it would indeed serve as a good role model for other Muslim countries, as well as allay the fears of the Union about the interaction of religion and politics in Turkey.

**European Rendezvous**

On the eve of the Copenhagen summit, there was a consolidated effort to set a firm date to start accession negotiations before the next wave of EU enlargement in 2004. The government and opposition, as well as business circles and civil society, united towards this goal. There is also strong public support.

Erdogan toured European capitals to promote the cause. Beyond the reluctant Franco-German camp, contacts in Britain, Italy, Spain, Greece and Belgium were encouraging.

The United States also firmly backed membership, given the strategic importance of Turkey as a much-needed ally in a possible military campaign against Iraq and a good model for the Muslim world.

In Copenhagen, European leaders pushed the button for the Union's biggest enlargement, taking in ten more countries by May 2004. As for Turkey, the Union decided on a review in December 2004 to assess its progress in fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria. Negotiations could start 'without further delay', meaning not earlier than 2005. While Turkish leaders managed to secure a firm 'rendezvous date', the decision was not quite what they had hoped for and it left a bitter aftertaste.

There is relief that Turkish-EU relations have finally been put on an 'irrevocable path.' To alleviate Turkish fears that the newcomers, particularly Cyprus, might block its way, twenty five countries of the enlarged Union issued a joint statement endorsing Turkey's accession process.

**Obstacles Ahead**

Turkey is aware of the serious political and economic obstacles on its path towards membership. Their resolution is essential to democratic consolidation and economic recovery at home. The process of accession will be neither quick nor easy.

On the European side, there are concerns regarding Turkey's size, poor economy, troublesome neighbourhood and cultural differences. European leaders are also preoccupied with absorbing the financial and bureaucratic burden of the current enlargement.

There are challenging tasks awaiting Turkish leaders and people. Although somewhat disheartened by the European decision, it is crucial that they keep up the momentum of reform.

The outgoing government introduced thirty four important constitutional changes on previously taboo issues, such as granting educational and broadcasting rights to the Kurdish minority, and abolishing the death penalty at a very sensitive time when the future of jailed Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan was being decided.

The new administration has unveiled a fresh reform package to enhance democracy and individual liberties. It has vowed zero tolerance on torture and formally lifted the fifteen-year state of emergency in the southeast. Emergency rule was imposed there in 1987 to curtail Kurdish separatist activities and it provided extraordinary powers to carry out investigations and detain suspects. People in the region welcomed the decision as a sign of a shift to normalcy. More than a thousand gathered in Diyarbakir city centre singing and dancing in celebration.

Improving human rights and democracy, particularly for the Kurdish minority, will be a major test. Another sensitive issue is reducing the military's role in politics. Given the Islamic roots of the party and the strong sentiment for the army to continue as the
guarantor of the secular state, it is in the interest of the Justice and Development party to reduce the political influence of the army through Brussels. Sensitive issues will be much easier for the new government within a European framework.

A major investment in the education of young people and restructuring of the education system will yield high returns in the long run and also significantly contribute to Turkish-EU relations. Europeans are apprehensive about the size of Turkey, but a young, well educated population could be an asset in a rapidly ageing Europe.

**AEGEAN DISPUTES AND CYPRUS**

In foreign affairs Turkey will be hard pressed until December 2004. Bilateral problems with Greece over the Aegean, as well as Cyprus, will have important repercussions for relations with the Union.

Until recently, Greece has been one of the major centres of opposition to Turkish membership of the Union. Erdogan has already presented a more moderate approach to the future of the divided island. Consequently, Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis was the first foreign leader to congratulate him on the election victory, and Erdogan made Athens one of the first stops in his European tour.

Turkey has major concerns, particularly regarding territorial issues in Cyprus, but the UN proposal for a settlement presents an opportunity that both sides should take seriously. However, the admission to the EU of a divided Cyprus while the Turkish case is still rather unclear, makes a speedy resolution of the dispute highly unlikely.

**CHRISTIAN CLUB**

There are also questions for European Union countries that they have long been putting off. First, how does the Union want to define itself and EU citizenship, particularly after the new wave of enlargement? And what should be done about the future of Turkish-EU relations?

The question of Turkish admission has sparked an unprecedented debate about the definition of Europe and the future of the Union. Many politicians view it as a 'common project of shared values and destinies' and emphasise multiculturalism. On the other hand, there is a group whose views were epitomised by the remarks of former French President and European Convention Chairman Valéry Giscard d'Estaing.

Strongly opposed to Turkish membership, they tend to define Europe in culturally exclusive and religious terms. They claim that Turkey is 'not a European country' and that, being Muslim, it should not be accepted into the Union, which is essentially a Christian club. Giscard d'Estaing went so far as to say that, in his opinion, Turkey's entry would mean 'the end of Europe.'

This view neglects the historical development of Turkey's relations with Europe and the Union. Throughout the Cold War, as a member of NATO, it was regarded as an indispensable European country crucial for the continent's security. Giscard d'Estaing should be reminded that it was his predecessor, General Charles de Gaulle, who said back in 1963 that Turkey was a European country and therefore eligible to join, at the same time that he was vetoing the membership of Britain.

Turkey has been a member of the Council of Europe and signed an association agreement with the European Community in 1963. It established a customs union in 1996, and was officially recognised as a candidate country at the Helsinki summit of 1999. As the EU high representative for foreign and security policy Javier Solana pointed out at Helsinki: 'Turkey has already booked its place in Europe.' The Copenhagen decision can be viewed as confirmation.

If Christianity is at the core of European identity and the Union is defined exclusively in religious terms, has the continent forgotten its centuries-long struggle culminating in the co-existence of Catholicism, a variety of Protestant views, Anglicanism, and Orthodoxy? Where would Europe's own substantial Muslim population fit? And most importantly, what about the other core ideals and values and the open societies that the EU claims to stand for?

**OPEN SOCIETY**

The term open society was coined by the French philosopher Henri Bergson and developed further by Austrian philosopher Karl Popper in his 1945 book 'Open Society and its Enemies.' At the most fundamental level, an open society is characterised by the rule of law, respect for human rights and minority opinions, and freedom of thought and expression. Rather than a rigid and exclusive political and social structure, it is based on participation and inclusion.

The concept encompasses the positive aspects of democracy and is supposed to define the core values of European identity. At this critical crossroads, it is crucial that open societies and open minds shape the future of Turkey, the EU and relations between them.

Marginalising Turkey by isolating it from European enlargement and integration would only play into the hands of the radicals. While the world is deeply troubled by the surge of Islamic radicalism, it is particularly important for the new Ankara government to demonstrate that Islam and democratic ideals can be reconciled. A Turkey firmly anchored in the European Union will certainly have more success in this difficult endeavour.

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