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Turkey

In search of lost stability

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"We have committed suicide": this comment by the outgoing prime minister, Bülent Ecevit, aptly sums up the situation following the Turkish parliamentary elections of November 3, 2002. On that day, all the traditional parliamentary parties were rejected at the ballot box, in elections that they themselves had called two years earlier than necessary, without any real debate and with a tone of bravado.

Rejection of the political class

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/25_erbakan.jpg]

Erbakan, on a wing and a prayer

Ecevit did however add that his party could have won if the elections had taken place at the scheduled time, in 2004, thus demonstrating that he had understood nothing of what had happened! The political blindness shown by one of the veteran traditional leaders is in itself a patent proof of the complete bankruptcy of the Turkish political class. Indeed, what other explanation could there be for a party that won the elections in 1999 with 22% gaining 1.2% this time, losing more than 6 million voters in the space of three years, while its second coalition partner fell from 18% to 8.7% and the third from 13% to 5%, the three of them together losing nearly 12 million voters in total?

Certainly, this tripartite coalition comprising a populist and nationalist 'left' (the DSP), the nationalist far right (MHP) and a liberal 'pro-European' right, was in power during the great economic crisis of February 2001, which led to a fall of 30% in Turkey's GDP. Also, by clinging desperately to power, the aged and practically senile Ecevit had contributed to his own downfall, provoking a split in his party last spring, losing half his parliamentary group; its two associates in power continued to squabble over governmental posts; the government itself had lost all coherence; the 'austerity' programme dictated by the IMF had put a knife to its throat and so on. Who, then, could be astonished at a political collapse of this kind?

True, but how then can we explain that the two main opposition parties, the SP of Erbakan (the old traditional Islamist leader) and the DYP of Ciller (rightwing conservative, rural and with criminal connections), who gained respectively 15% and 12% of the votes in 1999, had also lost nearly 5 million voters in total, with only 2.5% and 9.5% at these elections? How can we explain also that the 'Young Party' (GP), a pseudo-party created from all kinds of fragments two months before the elections by Cem Uzan, the head of a media and telecommunications empire (in short a sort of 'Turkish Berlusconi'), was able to win more than 7% of the votes for an electoral list made up uniquely of managers and employees of his companies (on the basis of a demagogic populist-nationalist discourse).

'Total rejection' of the traditional parties

Without lingering on this phenomenon of 'total rejection' of the outgoing political class it would be totally illusory to try to understand and comment on the success of the AKP' led by Tayyip Erdogan. [1] All abstract analyses on the 'nature of this party' and all speculation on its 'real intentions' are beside the point if not placed in the context of a reflection on this political process.

In the first place, it would be useful to recall the chronic crisis and the instability of the Turkish political system since the end of the 1980s (which had been dominated by the ANAP of Turgut Ązal). The following decade was marked

by rivalries and quarrels among the leaders of the traditional parties, divided into four rival groupings: the ANAP and the DYP on the right, the CHP and DSP on the left. The progressive erosion of these parties, which mutually paralyzed each other, allowed the rise in power of the traditional Islamist movement around Erbakan, and subsequently the nationalist far right of the MHP.

In the 15 last years, all these parties have succeeded each other in power in a game of musical chairs, forming rickety, heterogeneous, clientist, populist and corrupt coalitions. All this has led to an increasingly obvious breakdown of the political world, characterized by: supplementary splits; a total loss of credibility of leaders and parties; a growing depoliticisation; an increasing role for the bureaucracy (notably the military) in the management of the country; shameful chaos, waste and pillage; with all of this engendering a morose pessimism inside all the social classes and layers (including the bourgeoisie), but also a deep frustration and an anger directed against the state apparatus (in particular after the 1999 earthquake) and against politicians, with a culminating point in the economic crisis of 2001.

A simple glance at the results of the last five elections shows this evolution: five different parties have won these elections with a different party in second place on very occasion. 1987: the ANAP came first with 36% and the CHP second with 25%; 1991: 27% for the DYP and 24% for the ANAP; 1995: 21% for the RP and 19% each for the DYP and the ANAP; 1999: 22% and 18% for the winning DSP/MHP ticket; 2002: 34% for the AKP and 19% for the CHP. Behind this apparent lack of coherence in voting behaviour there is an implacable logic: to 'punish' the parties in power and replace them by every possible and imaginable alternative.

New elements

While following this same logic of 'punishment/substitution', the elections of November 3, 2002 nonetheless marked a signal change in at least four decisive areas, which could indicate a radical turn over the next decade:

– Until now the classic equilibrium of 30-35% in total for the left and 65-70% for the right seemed to be maintained, giving the impression that the old schemas and political fidelities had basically not changed very much. Today the total vote for all the left parties is barely 23%. In other words, the CHP of Baykal gained only half the 6.3 million voters lost by Ecevit's DSP. That could reflect deep social changes over the last 20 years.

– Until 2002, the score of the two biggest parties fell constantly in relation to the scores of the winners of the preceding election, indicating a vote of defiance and reaction, rather than of confidence in the new parties. Today, if the score of the CHP can be analyzed in this framework (despite an increase of 11%, it did less well than the DSP in 1999), the same is not true for Erdogan's AKP, which obtained the highest score of any party since 1987, a result which broadly exceeds the absolute record vote for the political family from which it originates. This, then, was a vote of 'confidence and hope' if not yet unstinting support.

– Since 1987, no party has been able to win an absolute majority and govern alone. That is not the case with the AKP, which is close to the two thirds majority which would allow it to change the Constitution (assuming the support of four of the nine independent deputies, all of whom are on the right) It is a genuine 'revolution' in the Turkish political world, which explains the cries of joy from the bourgeoisie and the media, who are delighted at the chance of returning to the stability lost since the death of Āzal.

– For the first time, more than half the electorate is not represented in Parliament: because of the threshold of 10% of the national vote needed to enter Parliament, only the AKP and the CHP have deputies, with 54% of the votes between them (plus 1% for the independent bodies). Hence 45% of the voters are officially excluded from the

parliamentary game. However, if one takes account of the record rate of abstention (21%) and the 2% of spoiled ballots, the 17 million voters of the AKP and the CHP only represent 41% of the 41.4 million registered voters.

Currently the AKP is enjoying a 'state of grace' and has an astonishing quasi-unanimous support from public opinion and the media. Even the CHP is behaving in a conciliatory fashion (apart from a very small minority of secular Kemalists). However, the situation could very rapidly change with the least economic or political crisis, or the least 'Islamist' turn on the part of the AKP. In other words, its strength today, its complete hegemony in Parliament in a country desperate for political stability and reform, could tomorrow become its main weakness and lead to a total questioning of its democratic legitimacy.

The AKP before a historic opportunity

Taking account of all these elements, the AKP now has a historic opportunity to take a central role in Turkish political life.

Founded three years ago as a split from the classic Islamist party, this party now presents itself as a 'democratic-conservative' party, 'modern' and attuned to globalised capitalism, but with Muslim conservative references. In sum, the founders of the AKP wish to create a kind of 'Muslim democratic' party in Turkey, like the Christian Democratic parties of Western Europe. If it is obvious that this kind of analogy has limits, it is equally clear that objectively the AKP can in no way be defined as a classic Islamist party, still less as fundamentalist.

It is a party with a strong base in the conservative Muslim middle bourgeoisie of central Anatolia, which was previously the classic clientele of the Islamist movement, but which now wishes to widen its horizon. With the current support of the secular big bourgeoisie of Istanbul, the AKP is well placed to reunify the various layers of the Turkish bourgeoisie, divided since the late 1960s. Thanks to its opening to Europe and its current ideological flexibility, the AKP seems also to attract support beyond the conservative intelligentsia, with some liberal intellectuals breaking from the paternalist and authoritarian conservatism of Kemalism.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/27_turkish_women.jpg]

The AKP also presents itself as the 'party of the poor and disinherited', a party that will finally deliver 'justice', a party that is honest, trustworthy and not corrupt. It has won very broad popular support, from the deprived in the big cities like Istanbul, layers of the poor Anatolian peasantry, and some of the Kurds in the east of the country. In short, a mass cross-class party is being born, with all the advantages (massive strength) and fragilities (internal tensions) that involves.

The AKP is based on a network of political cadres who have been activists together for nearly 35 years and who have the same political references: Erdogan, Gül and their friends are nearly all of the same generation (in their fifties) and began to work together in the late 1960s in the youth organizations of the Islamist party of Erbakan. They have gone through the same experiences, sharing the same ephemeral successes and the same defeats, but they have also a common experience of management at the level of the main local governments of the country (like Istanbul, a huge town of 10 million inhabitants), and in national government (during the Erbakan-Çiller coalition from 1995 to 1997).

Their break with the old Islamic guard of Erbakan is not a simple quarrel between generations: it is linked to this experience of power. Erdogan and his friends have fully drawn the lessons of the defeat of their historic leader and his coalition government in the face of the army and public opinion in 1995-1997. Moreover, the AKP is no longer limited to a nucleus of former moderate Islamic modernizers; the party has won a series of important cadres from the

traditional right.

Its rapid, recent and massive success makes it a heterogeneous party that is still being constructed. It enjoys significant margins of manoeuvre, or in any case more than its predecessors of the last decade: its main political rivals, the parties and leaders of the traditional right, have entered into deep crisis, discredited, divided and for now excluded from the political game, while the left is also undergoing a huge crisis, whose catastrophic scope it does not yet seem to have recognized.

The bankruptcy of the left

It is indeed significant that neither the social democratic left nor the far left were capable of capitalizing on the huge popular discontent to emerge as an alternative both to the nationalist forces in power and to the AKP. The 19% score of the CHP should not create any illusions. The rightist leadership of this party has always been more concerned to reassure the bourgeoisie than to be the spokesperson of social demands. If it confines itself to this role in the coming period, attacking the AKP only on formal questions of secularism and continuing to appear as an appendix of the enlightened bureaucracy and the military, it has no chance of benefiting from the weaknesses of the government and it is the nationalist far right which could become the alternative to the AKP in the eyes of the popular masses.

As for the far left, it has succumbed once more to its old sectarian demons. The balance sheet drawn by comrade Ufuk Uras, president of the Ā-DP, of the defeat of its party is severe, but lucid and justified (see article). Paralyzed for three years by internal disputes among authoritarian apparatchiks, demoralized by its divisions and debates cut off from reality, the Ā-DP has finally broken up into several sectarian fragments, losing its credibility and its capacity of attraction, disappointing the hopes raised by its initial pluralist project. A fundamental renewal is then necessary. However, most of the leaders of the multiple groups of the far left do not even seem conscious of the gravity of the situation, preferring to lord it over their tiny grouping, nourished by their legends of 'Marxist patriarchs' and 'old fighters'

In these conditions of a political vacuum on the right and the left, if the AKP succeeded even a little in improving the situation it could continue to progress at the next elections, gaining both to its right and to its left. In other words, even without working miracles, it would be enough for it to not make too many big mistakes, not to disappoint immediately like all its predecessors. It could establish itself as the main mass party of the Turkish right, like the DP [\[2\]](#) of the 1950s and the AP [\[3\]](#) of the 1960s (both won more than 50% of the vote) or again the ANAP of the 1980s (45% of the vote).

The debris of neo-liberalism

The country has lived through such an economic catastrophe, barely a year and a half ago, that the least improvement would appear as a 'miracle' and would be welcomed by the most deprived. Moreover, with the bitter medicine of the IMF having already been dispensed by the outgoing government, it is not at all ruled out that, compared to the outgoing 'ultra neo-liberals', the AKP government is seen as the most 'social' of the last 20 years.

Bureaucratic chaos, corruption and waste have wrought enormous havoc with the public finances; the disorganization of the state apparatus has reached an unimaginable level of chronic inefficiency; civil servants have been demoralized by the partisan and unstable coalitions that have succeeded each other. The least appointment involved arduous bargaining between the coalition parties. Businesses were often obliged to triple their budgets for

bribery, for it was sometimes necessary to 'oil' the bureaucratic wheels of three distinct ministries or administrations, each dependent on a different party. A simple improvement in 'administrative efficiency' could then appear as a real revolution and might enable significant budgetary economies to be made.

Can the AKP do all this? The months to come will decide. In any case, its leaders seem conscious of the problem (and the possibilities that it offers them). Will they have the capacity and the political intelligence? It is interesting to quote here the words of the new 'retrograde Islamist' Prime Minister Abdullah Gül, in the daily 'Hürriyet' (November 25, 2002): 'I have been stupefied to see the state things were in when I took office. Even the office of our party is more modern than the office of the prime minister.. I have just installed the very first computer there..' It is true that Ecevit, his 'secular, modernist and progressive' predecessor, would type all his mail and speeches on his old typewriter.

The bourgeoisie's programme of modernization

The new government has moreover announced a vast project of democratic and anti-bureaucratic reforms as well as economic and social restructurings, with the aim of adapting Turkey to the norms of the EU. This project of global restructuring is precisely the kind of programme of modernization the big bourgeoisie has been demanding for a long time and the AKP will have all necessary support from the employers in implementing it.

For sure, a 'better administrative management' is not enough to seriously deal with all the social and economic problems besetting a country of Turkey's size. Recent history shows that Turkey cannot count too much on European aid to overcome the difficulties of the process of adaptation to EU membership. It is clear that the EU will do still less for Turkey than for the former central and eastern European countries: and not only for reasons of 'economic size', world conjuncture and imperialist will, but also through deep anti-Turkish racism and anti-Muslim sentiment on the part of the European political class (Vedrine, Schmidt and Delors as much as Giscard and Kohl). Not to speak of the hostility or indifference (in the best of the cases) of public opinion, indeed of the European left intelligentsia, which has little sympathy for the fate of a country which 'oppresses the Kurds/massacres the Armenians/is a military dictatorship/or quasi-fundamentalist' and which is moreover so complex, different and difficult to understand. And yet the Turkish bourgeoisie continues to bet everything on European integration. It is true that it does not really have much choice in the current state of the world and its geographic region, given that 2/3 of Turkey's trade is with the EU.

Through all these reforms, the Turkish bourgeoisie hopes to be able to attract investment from international capital: note that the presence of foreign capital in the Turkish economy is astonishingly weak for an industrialized country of this size. It is undoubtedly the archaism of the Turkish state, the relative weakness of its infrastructure, the protectionism which was in force up to the late 1980s and the political instability of the 1990s which are the initial causes of this, and the big Turkish employers now want to change this situation through a reform programme. They believe they are now strong enough to compete with European capital and they need a reliable political personnel that enjoys popular legitimacy and has an electoral base that is sufficiently broad. The AKP is the candidate for this role and the bourgeoisie has decided to go through the experiment.

It is not then surprising that, despite its image or its 'Islamist' past, the AKP has prioritized the problem of European integration, promising notably to resolve finally the question of Cyprus in the framework of the proposals of the UN and to resolve some key problems of 'democratization' and of 'demilitarization'. The crushing electoral defeat of left and right nationalism (DSP + MHP) creates a suitable climate for reforms, but it is still too soon to see how far the AKP will go.

An Islamism adapted to the market?

The AKP is also changing its tune on the thorny question of secularism. Erdogan was using spine chillingly uncompromising Islamist language not so long ago, and there is a 'reactionary' dimension to Turkish Islamism, which found it hard to stomach the republican victory at the beginning of the last century. In addition, in case of defeat in its policy of reforms or a new economic crisis, the AKP could well be tempted to play the Islamic card.

However, one might expect the AKP leadership in the short term to avoid flagrant errors or outrageous provocations in the area of secularism. It underpins the success of its overall project. Nor should one expect a short-term tension between the government and the army - the guarantor of Kemalist principles and secularism. Even if the army distrusts Erdogan and will do not sacrifice its direct political influence and its advantages as a privileged and 'enlightened' bureaucratic caste, it is now too linked to the big bourgeoisie to openly oppose its projects (OYAK, the holding which manages the army's pension funds, is today one of the most powerful capitalist groups in the country!). Nor does it wish to give the impression of not respecting the verdict of the ballot box.

Moreover, secularism in Turkey is a Jacobin secularism in the French style, and it is primarily this 'over rigid' model that the AKP claims to question, not the principle of secularism itself. Its eventual aim would be to convince the army and big bourgeoisie to establish a 'German' or 'English' secularism; a regime that is very conservative on the moral plane, where a greater place is given to religion in the public arena.

This the true threat today is not a 'fundamentalist danger' in the short term, but rather that the AKP attains a durable grip on power as a pole of bourgeois and pro-imperialist stability. The problem is that in the current state of play it is far from certain that socialism can really become a short-term alternative to this project of bourgeois stabilization and European integration. A catastrophic collapse and economic regression, the rise of an openly fascist or fundamentalist mass movement, or again the emergence of a fairly ferocious military dictatorship and a chaotic civil war seem more serious candidates for this role.

All the more reason for the urgent construction of credible left pole of attraction, genuinely democratic and anchored in real life, more concerned with alternative projects than an abstract discourse dating from a past era. As comrade Ufuk Uras stresses: "The left is in a phase of transition. Either it will renew itself or it will become petrified. It should be said that the fault is essentially ours and not that of the people. Finally, it is a good thing to see that the lessons learnt by heart by the left have proved bankrupt. To those who wish anew to recite those lessons, I wish good luck. However, today, the most revolutionary task is to tear up these lessons learnt by heart and place oneself at the heart of life itself. If the left has entered into a coma, it is not those who put it in that condition who will bring it out again. It is necessary to give way to youth."

[1] Party of Justice and Development. The acronym of the party also has a political meaning in that its leaders pronounce it AK Party (instead of saying AKP) since AK in Turkish means both 'white' (thus 'clean', 'not corrupt') and also 'clear' (hence the opposite of obscure, whereas the secularists accuse it of being 'obscurantist').

[2] The Democratic Party, led by Menderes (the prime minister overthrown by the coup of 1960 and hung in 1962).

[3] The Party of Justice, led by Demirel, overthrown first by the coup of 1971, then definitively dissolved after the coup of 1980.