

Turkey 2007 – The Crossroad

by Manuel Larrotcha,

2007 in Turkey has been a year of elections. Parliament was to elect a new President of the Republic in April and general elections were scheduled for November. Since 2002 the Justice and Development Party (AKP), a party with Islamic roots, had enjoyed an overwhelming majority in Parliament (357 MPs out of a total of 550) and in April 2007 this situation provided a golden opportunity for this party to have one of its members, Abdullah Gül, elected by Parliament to become the 11th President of the Turkish Republic. Mr. Gül, a very prominent member of the AKP and Foreign Minister 2002 – 2007, was, therefore, put forward as a candidate. He was thought to have moderate views and he was well known and appreciated in both European Union and United States circles.

The Presidency of the Republic had been occupied, since the inception of the new Turkish State in 1923, by statesmen who had taken great care to ensure that the secular founding principles of the Republic were properly adhered to and protected. The AKP's attempt to reach the Presidency of the Republic was rejected by a vast segment of the public opinion, particularly by those social classes most attached to secularism, the kemalist elites, and, needless to say, by the mighty military who, since Attatürk's times, have considered themselves as the guardian of modern Turkey's founding principles. Millions of people, suspicious of a possible AKP's "hidden agenda" to draw Turkey towards an Islamic model, marched on the streets of the main Turkish cities to express their disapproval of the AKP's plans. The main opposition Party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), founded by Attatürk, fiercely secularist and kemalist - and supposedly social-democrat – tried its best to block Mr. Gül's candidature. The CHP challenged before the Constitutional Court the validity of the procedure used in Parliament to elect the President of the Republic. Odd enough, this procedure had regularly been used to elect previous Presidents with no complaints. The Turkish Constitution is clear in this respect: The President shall be elected by a two – thirds majority of the total number of members of Parliament...if such a majority cannot be obtained in the first two ballots, a third ballot shall be held and the candidate who receives the absolute majority of votes of the total number of members shall be elected President of the Republic...

Therefore, the APK was confident that, at least, in the third ballot Mr. Gül would be elected. But the main opposition Party, the CHP, argued that the requirement of two – thirds majority for the first and second ballots not only applied to the number of votes needed to be elected, but also to the number of MPs who should be present (quorum) for the session to be valid. And in order to prevent the said two – thirds majority quorum, the 149 CHP MPs stayed away

from the session, bringing the argument to the Constitutional Court. Legally speaking, the CHP position had no strong basis, but the Constitutional Court endorsed it and declared the process invalid.

The Primer Minister saw no other alternative than to call an early general elections for July 22, where the AKP got a resounding victory with 47% of the popular vote. In 2002 the AKP had got 35% of the vote. Participation was impressive at 85%. The AKP got a new absolute majority in Parliament with 341 MPs, while the CHP was weakened falling from 149 to 98 MPs. The AKP, with a freshly gained legitimacy, tried again to have Mr. Gül elected as President of the Republic and succeeded on August 28, in the third ballot. The new composition of the Assembly, with other political parties who did not boycott the procedure, and the absolute majority of the AKP ensured this time the election of Mr. Gül.

In April, the Armed Forces joined the opposition to block and derail Mr. Gül's candidature to become President of the Republic. On April 27, the Armed Forces issued on their web page a statement to warn against any temptation to deviate from secularism and kemalism, basic guiding principles of the Republic of Turkey since its birth in 1923. It was the so-called "virtual coup d'état" which, together with massive demonstrations in major Turkish cities in defense of kemalism, sent a serious warning to the AKP government not to introduce reforms which might be deemed as detrimental to secular values. It is worth noting that in the past, 1997 for example, similar statements by the military had had a direct impact on civilian governments who, confronted and challenged by this hard talk from the military, had resigned to open the way for another government most likely to get the generals' blessings. This time it was different. Prime Minister Erdogan had accepted, although not shared, the verdict of the Constitutional Court which derailed the AKP bid to raise Gül to the Presidency of the Republic. But Erdogan firmly answered the military, inviting them to mind their own business and to stay in their barracks. It was the first time that such a thing happened in modern Turkish history. Later, elections on July 22 enabled the AKP to reach its objectives.

The powerful military are aware that the time to bring main battle tanks onto the streets to stop the democratic process is over. They also realize now that Erdogan's AKP is a formidable political machine, an imposing force to be acknowledged, not likely to yield if confronted with military statements or warnings on the web or in the media. Few options are available for the military other than to accept a "fait accompli" and to watch very attentively the performance of the AKP which has got a one-coloured government, an absolute majority in Parliament and one of its most prominent leaders, Mr. Gül, at the very top job of the Republic. Controlling the Presidency of the Republic is important as in Turkey – although not formally a Presidential regime – the President has considerable powers to veto bills and high officials appointments, including Ambassadors proposed by the Government. Moreover, the President can appoint the top echelons of the Judiciary, including the members of the Constitutional Court, and of the University. His decisions, therefore, exert a large influence on the judicial and education fields.

The rise of the AKP as a formidable political force, means that a whole new class, emerging middle class citizens, businessmen and liberal professions, want to play a role in the conduct of public affairs. They have converged on the AKP and they have conquered, by democratic means, the Executive and the Legislative powers and to a lesser extent, through the President of the Republic, the Judiciary. It is clear that part of the AKP supporters are pious Muslims who wish the Koran to inspire the action of the Government and the administration of the "res publica". But there are many other AKP backers, perhaps a majority, who are just ordinary citizens, Muslim by creed but not particularly devout, who could be compared to the millions of citizens in the West who are Christians, at least in theory, and vote for conservative options.

The key to success for the AKP has been to bring together millions of people who had become sceptical about the ability of the traditional ruling elites to deliver and to lead the country forward into the new century. Turkey had been for years bogged down in political and financial crisis, enduring four *coups d'état* in 40 years (1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997). Turkey was unable to take a jump into modernity and become part of Europe, which was one major aim of Atatürk's revolution. Turkey's society was for decades led from above, led from State structures dominated by the traditional elites.

The arrival of the AKP to the political scene in 2002 brought with it a blow of fresh air into Turkish politics. The new Government, with Mr. Erdogan as Prime Minister and Mr. Gül as Foreign Minister, succeeded in breaking the vicious circle of revolving crisis. With the help of the IMF, the Government was able to overcome the financial critical situation of 2001, new major infrastructure projects were undertaken, education, health and social services were improved all across the nation and huge amounts of foreign direct investment came into the country. Besides, in October 2005 the Government managed to start the negotiating process with the European Union, a goal which had been unattainable for different Turkish governments for years.

But there are many people in Turkey who do not share this rosy picture of the AKP. Secularists and military alike fear that now that the AKP has gained control of the main offices of the State, its leadership may be tempted to implement the so-called "hidden agenda", the islamization of Turkey to establish an Islamic Republic, along the lines of Iran or Malaysia, where all secular freedoms and guarantees that Turkish citizens enjoy today would be severely limited.

The good economic performance of the AKP Government 2002 – 2007, together with the manoeuvres of the main opposition Party (CHP) to block Mr. Gül's rise to the Presidency of the Republic, contributed to the resounding AKP victory in the July 22, 2007 general elections, jumping from 35% to 47% in popular support. Millions of people, who had just been witness of the political process for years, woke up and massively backed the AKP. They wanted power-sharing and to exercise their right to join the banquet table and to have their share of the cake.

This new scenario where the AKP has accumulated, by popular will, so much power, provides an unprecedented window of opportunity for Turkey to leave the past behind and to enter modernity. Prime Minister Erdogan has a vision and enjoys charisma and authority within his Party. A new era may be opening, bringing huge possibilities to engage into a process of modernization in political, economic and social terms. A new Constitution is being drafted to replace that of 1982 which was born under the shadow of the military 1980 coup. AKP sources, close to the Constitution drafting committee, talk about a "civilian" Constitution, as opposed to the one of 1982 which is allegedly "military". The new Constitution would put emphasis on individual rights, duties and liberties instead of being focussed, as the current Constitution, on the prerogatives of the State and the role of the State as tutor and guardian of the people. The AKP leadership wishes to promote radical reforms in the Penal Code to eliminate provisions as controversial as article 301 and others which restrict freedom of expression. The Government aims at the 10.000 US\$ per capita income as an achievable target and wishes Turkey to play a growing role as a regional actor in the Middle east, while becoming a model to show that Islam and democracy, contrary to what many people may think, are compatible.

The challenges are huge. The country is very heterogeneous in terms of regional, economic and social development. Many problems must be resolved, including the integration of minorities into a cohesive and inclusive national project, particularly the population, more

than 15 millions, of Kurdish ethnic origin who lives in the Southeast of the country. Many other issues have to be tackled in the field of education, health, regional and rural development, infrastructures, basic services, human and women's rights, gender equality...etc. Moreover, there seems to be a growing gap between the portion of the voters who trust the AKP (47%) and another faction (53%) who at the last elections voted for other political options. There are many other critical and unresolved issues such as Cyprus, tension along the border with Irak over PKK terrorism, the question of Kirkuk and the Turkmen community in Northern Irak, allegations on the so called "Armenian genocide", future relations with the EU and with the USA...

The big question mark, in my view, is whether the AKP will be able to manage with common sense the huge political capital it has received from the Turkish people. The AKP leadership has given assurances that it will respect the secular principles of the Republic and Attatürk's legacy. President Gül has solemnly stated that he will be neutral as the President of all the Turks. But, at the same time, small but meaningful details in everyday life fuel the flames of suspicion: limitations for alcohol consumption at certain bars and restaurants, subtle censorship on women's gear if judged too daring, praise and promotion of Islamic values...etc.

If the AKP does have a "hidden agenda", it will not get a better opportunity to implement it. But it has also the best chance to promote decisive reforms and changes so that Turkey enters, once and for all, modernity and fully joins Western nations. The attitudes of the European Union and of the United States of America will be important in the process but, in the end, the ultimate decision, effort and responsibility lie with the Turkish people.

Remarks:

Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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