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Turkey Veers off The Democratic Path

By Cenk Sidar

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On the surface, the past 10 years look like they have been good ones for Turkey. The country increased its status and leverage in global affairs, while the economy grew substantially and reforms made by Justice and Development Party (AKP) pushed the Turkish system of democracy toward a higher standard. The public rewarded the AKP with significant election victories three times in a row, in 2002, 2007, and 2011. These political accomplishments cannot be ignored. But they may have made the AKP overconfident.

In the past two years, the three pillars of the AKP's perceived success, foreign policy, economy and democratization, have all been revealed to have cracks in their foundations. The party's foreign policy doctrine of "zero problems with neighbors" has failed to the point in which Turkey, ironically, has multiple problems with all its neighbors. The economy has overheated to a dangerous degree, fueling high inflation and a large current account deficit which made the country alarmingly dependent on foreign capital, amid the central bank's incoherent management. And, perhaps most disturbingly of all, Turkey's democracy has veered off on a more authoritarian path-with journalists

and activists facing jail time for expressing their beliefs; Kurdish rights, once a priority for the AKP, being trampled; and the judiciary system compromised for political gain.

The foreign-policy developments of the past two years have put at risk the coherency, credibility, and future of Turkey as a regional leader. While Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu seeks to maintain the illusion of a peaceful Middle East under Turkish leadership, Iran has threatened to retaliate if NATO missiles based in Turkey are activated, and Syria says it will hit back if Turkey does not stop arming rebel groups there. The situation in Syria also risks hurting ties with Russia, on which Turkey is dependent for 70% of its energy imports. The economy's growth masks serious structural problems—high rates of unemployment, strong income inequality, and the large current account deficit along with persistent poverty. Rather than taking solid action, the AKP leadership has preferred to downplay the clear risks and continued to encourage Turks to spend more to fuel the economy—in effect gambling with the debt of Turkish consumers, as household indebtedness has soared in the past three years. Amidst the global economic crisis, the ruling party continues to kick the can down the road, apparently leaving reform to future governments, as it dismisses the risks posed by the possibility of capital flight and pursues growth at all costs.

The technocratic nature of economic and foreign policy helps the AKP government to avoid candid public discussions about these aspects of its rule. However, there is another problematic area that is impossible to hide. Turkey has seen a growing trend of human rights violations, suppression of freedom of speech, and exploitation of the judiciary system for political benefit. The damage done by civil repression and autocratic actions of the government risks creating irreparable cracks in the social and cultural roots of Turkish society. Such damage represents a much more critical risk to Turkey than any mismanagement of economic and foreign policy.

Over the past decade, the Western media has applauded Turkey for steps taken toward democratic reform. The power of the military was reined in and the long-ignored Kurdish population won important rights. Even though the EU accession process has been the key triggering factor for these reforms, the AKP government has benefitted from the favorable public response to the changes.

But in the past two years, it has become more obvious that those earlier steps of the AKP were not sincere and were not based on honest implementation of universal values. The party has grown more conservative and nationalist and has turned on the Kurds, human rights activists, opposition groups and the media, basically any group that have been critical of its policies. This new AKP identity not only threatens the future of the party, but the future of Turkey itself.

Let's start our analysis with the Kurdish issue. From the early years of the AKP's first term, the party began to distance itself from traditional state rhetoric on the issue, which has hardened over the past

decades. In 2005, Erdogan declared that the state had made mistakes in its stance toward the Kurds. This represented a breakthrough moment and strongly boosted AKP's popularity among Kurdish voters. This was reflected in the 2007 elections, when the AKP almost doubled its votes in predominantly Kurdish areas.

Perhaps the most important push came in 2009 in the form of the AKP's so-called "Kurdish Initiative." (In an early indication that the program was doomed to failure, the government chose to change the title of the process to "Democratic Opening" in order to counter criticism from the opposition.) The initiative included broadening the cultural rights provided to the Kurdish population, including the launching of the first Kurdish-language state TV channel. It also, more controversially, initiated negotiations with the leadership of the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to surrender their arms and return from the mountains. However, the initiative was short-lived. The Kurdish celebrations organized in October 2009 following the PKK's decision to surrender 39 members created a strong backlash in public opinion. The AKP government, afraid of losing nationalist votes, backed off from pushing for further reforms and the momentum of the initiative eventually died.

Since then, political reforms have ground to a halt, and the AKP has reverted to Ankara's stance in the 1990s, which saw the Kurds as a problem to be solved with military force. The Uludere incident on December 28, 2011, an air attack on Kurdish civilians that left 34 people dead, was a turning point in this reversal. Following the attack, which was based on faulty intelligence, the AKP refused to accept responsibility and responded harshly to its critics. The incident clearly was a factor in deteriorating relations between the government and the Kurds. There has been a recent upsurge in PKK terrorism, the latest example an attack by PKK members in Hakkari on June 19, which resulted in the death of eight Turkish soldiers.

Now AKP is carrying out a crackdown on the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), a political umbrella organization that is alleged to be the urban wing of the PKK. So far, hundreds of people have been detained in the investigation, among them Kurdish students, political leaders including several mayors from the BDP, journalists, academics, businessmen and civil society leaders. The investigation into KCK started in December 2009 but has gained significant momentum in the past few years, with waves of arrests in the past couple of months. The detention of students in particular has created controversy, as in some cases the detainees were not even allowed to contact their lawyers. Even though some of the suspects have been proven to be involved in militant activity, most are not-yet they remain in prison amid the bureaucratic backlog. Meanwhile, the BDP continues to struggle to win rights for its constituents through the electoral system, but at this point it has been politically isolated, with almost no dialogue between the AKP government and the elected members of the BDP. As a result, the party's orientation toward militancy and its links with the KCK have been strengthening.

The case of Cihan Kirmizigul, a 21-year-old college student jailed for his alleged role in a protest, is another striking example of AKP's turnabout with regard to Kurdish rights. Kirmizigul was sentenced to 11 years in prison on no more evidence than that he was caught on camera wearing a poshu scarf, symbol of the Kurdish movement, similar to those worn by other protesters who had vandalized a business. His ethnic origin was all it took for the court to convict him.

The Kurds are not the only ones targeted by abuses of the judicial system. Turkey is now just behind China in the number of members of the media who are in jail. Respected journalist Nedim Sener was once among them, arrested following his investigation of the 2007 assassination of the Armenian intellectual Hrant Dink. He charged that Dink's killing was orchestrated by police, intelligence officials, and some other state officials. Instead of being rewarded by a government that claims to be the champion of democracy and clean politics, Sener was, preposterously, arrested on charges of being a member of the same paramilitary group that he accused of being responsible for the killing of Dink. Unlike many, Sener had a chance to prove his innocence after 13 months in prison and wrote a book about his experience that illustrates in disturbing detail how those 13 months were stolen from him and his family.

There are dozens of examples like those of Kirmizigul and Sener, and the government's treatment of them and others like them threatens the future of Turkey's democracy. The media voices that are silenced by imprisonment are sadly among a dwindling number of people who are willing to speak out.

The AKP's battle with the military has, likewise, been used as an excuse to grab power. Five years ago, the Turkish public was supportive when military leaders targeted the AKP in the infamous "e-memorandum" of April 27, 2007, and as it became clear that factions of the military had sought to topple the government through undemocratic means. But the AKP used this opportunity to broaden the fight, from the goal of preventing a coup to a more insidious one of creating a new military that only included its own political allies. Many mid-ranking and low-ranking officers are serving lengthy prison time simply because, willingly or unwillingly, they followed orders from higher ranks. About 10 percent of the high-ranking generals are currently in jail, including two former chiefs of general staff. The court proceedings against military personnel in the so-called Ergenekon trials are political theater, with shadowy evidence at best. Even before trial, the structural problems and bureaucratic weaknesses of the judiciary system have been exploited by AKP to keep its enemies silenced and jailed. Many people spend months and months in prison before they see an indictment.

During this time, Turkey's social democrats, entrenched in opposition to the AKP over issues such as its lack of commitment to secularism, have been distracted by political dogma and failed to recognize the country's deeper problems. But Republican People's Party (CHP) is now coming around to a better understanding of how to turn the spotlight on Turkey's failures in foreign policy and economic policy and, crucially, is well-placed to issue a warning about its backsliding away from guarantees of

citizens' rights. CHP is finally prepared, too, to offer an agenda of solutions, as seen in its decisive action of starting a new dialogue with AKP in order to resolve the Kurdish issue. AKP is stumbling at a turning point for the country. This presents a window of opportunity, which social democrats should seize-but must use wisely.