

THE JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY AND THE EU

Tozun Bahcheli

Professor of Political Science

King's University College at the University of Western Ontario

“We shall shock the Europeans”, boasted Turkey’s foreign minister Abdullah Gul, a few days after his Justice and Development Party (JDP) swept to power in the elections of November 2002 with a huge parliamentary majority. Led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the JDP government won high marks in EU circles for carrying out an impressive range of reforms expanding human rights, and bringing about some limits to the authority of the Turkish military.

However, during the past three years, the EU-Turkey relationship has fared poorly. The slowdown of the JDP’s reform agenda has been blamed, at least in part, on the opposition of several European governments. The bid to deny Turkish membership in favour of so-called “privileged partnership” (a course advocated by President Sarkozy of France, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, and by the Austrian government) has weakened pro-EU groups in Turkey. On the other hand, while acknowledging the impact of European Turkosceptics, many observers point to the political dynamics within Turkey, and the JDP’s own political calculations to help explain the increasing drift and pessimism in Turkey-EU relations. What is evident is that the near-total consensus in favour of the EU that appeared in Turkey at the time that the JDP took power has largely disappeared.

Many in the JDP have admitted the slowing down of the reform process. They have cited a number of reasons for this such as the distraction when the party faced closure by the Constitutional Court during 2007. But Brussels and Turkish reformers view these largely as excuses, and argue that the government is stalling, particularly since the JDP achieved an impressive new mandate in the elections of July 2007.

Ankara is indeed hedging, and this is explainable largely by domestic Turkish politics. Of the three opposition parties that are represented in parliament,

only one (the Kurdish Democratic Society Party) can be said to favour EU membership, and even its support has increasingly weakened due to European calls for the party to distance itself from the violence of the Kurdish insurgent group, the PKK.

The main opposition party, the Republican People's Party, defines itself as a Kemalist, secular, social democratic party, and professes support for Turkey's EU membership. Under the leadership of its current leader, Deniz Baykal, the party has become stridently nationalist and has opposed the democratizing legislation introduced by the JDP. The Nationalist Movement Party, led by Devlet Bahçeli, is even more resolute in opposing Turkey's EU accession. A nationalist, conservative party, it deeply suspects Europe (and the US) as having designs on Turkey's territorial integrity, and argues that Turkey has credible alternatives to becoming a part of the EU.

While the JDP has to contend with the opposition in parliament, support for the EU even in its own ranks has weakened noticeably since the party's early years in office. In part this is due to the frustration, widely felt in the country, over European politicians' opposition and even hostility to Turkish accession. But there have been other disappointments too. For the bulk of the Islamists in the JDP, the rejection of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) of the appeal to permit the wearing the headscarf in public institutions, was a major disappointment; this dented hopes that Europe would be supportive Turkish Islamists' quest to expand religious expression in Turkey's public sphere.

For the JDP, the stance of the powerful military is of little comfort either. Turkey's military has been on the losing side in a number of contests with the JDP, and has had to accept some curbs to its role. It is an open question as to whether it will allow itself to be subject to civilian control as is required by EU rules.

One segment of the Turkish society that remains strongly wedded to EU membership and wants the government to proceed with reforms is Turkish

liberals. They are no less unhappy with European cold-shouldering of Turkey than others in the country. But they are unhappier still with Erdogan for dragging his feet on reforms and adopting a stridently nationalist line in recent years.

Neither Brussels nor the JDP government relish the ending Turkey's quest for EU membership. In the meantime the Cyprus problem, arguably the most important impediment to Turkish accession, remains unresolved. The reforms that need to be achieved in Turkey require a formidable effort and commitment by the JDP government. For all the loose talk about other Turkish options, such as seeking alignments in the Middle East, or with Russia, or with Turkic states in the Caucasus and Central Asia, there is no credible Plan B for Turkey to fall back on. Prime Minister Erdogan has pledged to continue with EU-mandated reforms, but given the level of domestic opposition to a reformist agenda, he will proceed cautiously and avoid taking major political risks.