



The electoral victory of reformist Islamists in secular Turkey

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The Electoral Victory of Reformist Islamists in Secular Turkey

Duygu Bazoglu Sezer*

A political earthquake occurred in Turkey at the national elections on 3 November 2002. Two historic events took place simultaneously that day. First, the Turkish electorate brought to power the Justice and Development Party (AKP) founded only fifteen months before by a group of politicians who had defected from the Islamist-oriented Felicity Party (SP). Headed by Tayyip Erdogan, these self-styled "reformists"¹ insisted that they had "changed". From what to what? From their former political career as Islamists to a future career as "conservative democrats". This was the first time in republican Turkey's eighty-year modernisation/Westernisation journey that a political party with an Islamist image and colours – and distinct Islamist roots – was given a decisive popular mandate to govern the country single-handedly.²

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¹ In Turkish, *Yenilikciler*.

² Close to two dozen political parties ran in the elections. Five major parties with long experience and strong nationwide organisations had served in the outgoing parliament since 1999: The Democratic Left Party (DSP) of Bulent Ecevit, the National Action Party (MHP) of Devlet Bahçeli and the Motherland Party (ANAP) of Mesud Yilmaz governed in coalition. The True Path Party (DYP) of Tansu Ciller and the Felicity Party (SP) of Recai Kutan were the major parliamentary opposition. All five were defeated.

The SP was the last stronghold of the Islamist party tradition in Turkey that took formal shape in the 1960s. Islamist party organisation was banned by the military regime in the early 1980s. Return to civilian rule in a few years allowed it to re-organise itself under the

8 The Electoral Victory of Reformist Islamists in Secular Turkey

Second, the electorate effectively swept from power most of the political class that had dominated Turkish politics for nearly four decades. All five major parties which had served in the outgoing parliament since the 1999 general elections and the remaining, mostly marginal, parties failed to make it into the new parliament. Approximately ninety percent of the members of the outgoing parliament were voted out.

While the election results are a vindication of the progress of Turkish democracy, the overarching reshuffling of the political landscape still raises several fundamental questions as to the country's long-term political evolution and foreign policy orientation. Was this a vote for Islamism? Does it auger a new era challenging Turkey's secular state philosophy and constitutional order, thus inviting escalation of tensions between secular and Islamist forces? Will it eventually pose a threat to Turkey's traditional pro-Western foreign policy? Or was it merely a vote to get rid of the old guard held responsible for the pain suffered in the economic crisis of the last few years? Or could it be something else altogether? The answers to these questions are extremely important, especially because of the urgency of both the domestic and foreign policy agendas. The country is in the midst of a tough, IMF-supervised economic stability programme which has already begun to yield some positive results. On the foreign policy front, it faces vexing challenges such as the future course of Turkey-EU relations, the Cyprus conflict, and the possible American military action against Iraq.

The following discussion will try to shed some light on these questions by explaining the dynamics behind the AKP victory and the party's evolution from Islamist roots to reformism, which led to its taking on the label of "conservative democrat".³ The article will be organised as follows: a

roof of the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi-RP) founded by Necmeddin Erbakan, the charismatic leader of political Islam for several decades. The RP was the bulwark of organised political Islam in Turkey until it was closed down in early 1998 by a constitutional court injunction on charges of violations of the constitutional principle of secularism. The SP was thus a continuation of the tradition of the defunct RP. The defection of Tayyip Erdogan and his colleagues from the SP and eventually the establishment of the AKP by these very same "reformist" cadres in August 2001 was a deadly blow to the decades-long unity of political Islam in Turkey under the RP/SP banner.

³ Hard evidence and independent expert analysis of the radically new political scene are quite limited at this initial stage. This is especially true with regard to analysis concerning future prospects. Much analysis is tainted by political choices. This article, written in mid-December 2002, will draw heavily on the findings of two sets of public opinion surveys for its interpretation of the election results. Both were conducted in the immediate aftermath of the elections by highly respected social scientists, and some of their findings have been published in the press. The first set shall be referred to as the "Esmer poll", after the name of its

first part will examine the emerging political landscape. This will be followed by a description of the AKP, from Islamism to "conservative democrat". The next part analyses who voted for the AKP and why. The article ends with a survey of the political spectrum today and conclusions.

The old guard is out, but who is the "new"?

Having mustered the largest percentage (34.28 percent) of the popular vote, the AKP won 363 seats in the 550-seat parliament. It was thus in a position to form a single-party government after a decade of unstable coalition governments. Tayyip Erdogan could not assume the office of prime minister because the penal code banned him from running for parliament due to his prior conviction as an Islamist challenger to the secular state. Thus, Abdullah Gul has become the prime minister on the understanding that Erdogan will take over following the necessary constitutional amendments – an arrangement supported by the opposition.

The only other winner, with 19.4 percent of the votes, was the centre-left Republican People's Party (CHP) led by Deniz Baykal. The oldest party in Turkey, the CHP nevertheless had not made it to parliament in the last general elections. The electoral system translated its votes into 178 seats.

It is the arithmetics of the electoral system, therefore, that translated the votes cast for the AKP, roughly one-third of the total, into a 66 percent absolute majority in parliament. The AKP's 363 seats are just four less than the number needed to amend the constitution. The same system also favoured the CHP which, with only one-fifth of the total vote, was awarded a 32.3 percent representation in parliament. Nine deputies entered the parliament as independents. The ten percent vote threshold has thus greatly inflated the parliamentary strength of the AKP and the CHP, while barring the representation of approximately 45 percent of the votes cast for the other parties. As a result, the AKP was able to form a single-party government with a very strong parliamentary base. The CHP, the only opposition in parliament, is outnumbered by almost 2 to 1.

One of the most significant aspects of electoral behaviour on 3 November was the low turn-out. Only 76.2 percent of the registered voters cast valid votes. This was the lowest turnout in the last thirty years when the rate hovered between 80 and 90 percent – an indication of the electorate's growing mistrust of and alienation from party politics. Needless to say, such

pollster, Yilmaz Esmer. Some of its findings were published in *Milliyet* (a national daily) on 15-19 November 2002. The second set shall be referred to as the "TUSES poll", after the name of its sponsoring agency TUSES. Some of its findings were published in *Radikal* (a national daily) by Necat Erder on 14-15 November 2002.

alienation carries inherent risks for the future of democratic regimes, one of which is the opening thus created for potential radicals and dictators to appeal to the frustrated masses.

The AKP, from Islamist to “conservative democrat”

The AKP is, formally, a very young party in two senses: date of establishment and political philosophy. It was officially founded on 14 August 2001, with Tayyip Erdogan as its leader. Its political philosophy was publicly articulated – “fashioned” may be a more precise term – in bits and pieces as the leadership deserted its former ranks.

The true picture is more complex. The cadres who founded the AKP come from a well-established Islamist tradition that was politically organised around the now-defunct RP by Necmeddin Erbakan in the 1980s.⁴ Many of the founding members of the AKP were among the young activists of the movement in the 1990s, serving in the governing organs of the RP. In 1994, Erdogan ran for the office of mayor of Istanbul on the RP ticket and won. Abdullah Gül, a close associate of Erdogan and a founding member of the AKP, served as Prime Minister Erbakan’s minister of state in 1996.

A schism came out into the open in the highest ranks of the RP in the early part of 2000 between the self-styled “reformists”, led by Gül, and the “traditionalists”, led by the Erbakan loyalists. Why? What happened to bring about this division?

From the very beginning, the RP and its forerunners in the 1970s – all driven by Islamism in their approach to politics – had pursued an avowedly belligerent approach towards the established order, targeting in particular the secular pillar of the modern Turkish state. Erbakan’s unrelenting struggle with the secular state and anti-Westernism while in office as prime minister in 1996 in a coalition government with Tansu Ciller’s DYP ended in his removal from office in 1997 in a so-called “soft coup” by the military.⁵

⁴ For a brief account of RP’s evolution through organic association with powerful religious sects such as the Nakshibendis and, to a lesser extent, the Nurcus, see B. Yesilada, “The Virtue Party”, in Rubin, B. and M. Heper (eds), *Political Parties in Turkey* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), pp. 62-72.

⁵ For a perceptive analysis of Erbakan’s record as prime minister, see G. Kepel, *Jihad: Islamciliğin Yükselişi ve Gerilemesi* [*Jihad, Expansion et déclin de L’islamisme*] (Paris: Editions Callimard, 2000, translated by Haldun Bayri) pp. 382-401. For one of the most stimulating studies of the Turkish brand of political Islam, see B. Tibi, *Bogaz’ın İki Yakası: Avrupa ile İslamcılık Arasında Türkiye* [*Die Türkei zwischen Europa und dem Islamismus*] (Munich: Wilhem Veyne Verlag, 1996, translated by Sevinc Kabakcioglu, 2000). Tibi distinguishes Turkish Islamism by its nationalist colours and regional leadership aspirations.

The RP was closed down in January 1998 by a constitutional court injunction on charges of constitutional violations. Its reincarnation was the Virtue Party (FP), which was also closed down in 2001. The third generation successor to the RP tradition came in the shape of the Felicity Party (SP) founded in 2001. At about the same time, the reformists dealt a severe blow – perhaps a deadly one in retrospect – to the monolithic unity of political Islam by defecting from the SP to found the AKP.

Based on numerous party documents and pronouncements by officials since 2001, it seems highly likely that the reformists' defection was motivated primarily by a newly cultivated understanding to avoid challenging the political regime frontally, in particular on the question of secularism. In Article 2/1, the AKP Program appears quite explicit on the perceived need for accommodation with the system by formally pledging respect for Kemalist principles and reforms: "Our party perceives Atatürk's principles and reforms as the most important medium of bringing Turkey to the highest levels of contemporary civilisation and as an element of domestic peace..."

On secularism, the centrepiece of Kemalist principals and reforms, the same article has the following to say: "Our party sees religion as one of the most important institutions of man, and secularism as a principle that is indispensable for democracy and as a guarantor of the freedom of conscience."

Clearly the recognition extended to secularism in this document does not go all the way to including a clear commitment to honour the most commonly accepted definition of secularism, namely, separation of religion and state. It is the democracy-enhancing aspect of secularism that finds expression in the party program, which is no less important but falls short of fully responding to the issue. Yet, the pledge of loyalty to Kemalist principles and reforms quoted in the preceding paragraph is highly comprehensive.

In a document entitled, "The Identity of the AKP", issued on 21 February 2002, the party defined itself as centred, first and foremost, "on *man*, and not on *religion*".⁶ This implies a more direct commitment to the common understanding of secularism, as the state's function in democratic theory is to serve *man*. Much to the satisfaction of secular forces, this document seems to relegate religion outside the bounds of politics.

A second profoundly important dynamic that appears to have been responsible for the growing awareness among the younger elite of the need

⁶ AKP Genel Merkezi (AKP Headquarters) AKP Kimligi (The AKP's Identity), Ankara, 21 February 2002.

12 The Electoral Victory of Reformist Islamists in Secular Turkey

for fresh thinking for political survival was the exposure to world trends and developments in the 1990s. The political agenda of the neo-liberalising and globalising cosmos was dominated by issues of democratisation, human rights, the rule of law and identity politics. Turkey's relations with the West were tested in the 1990s against the shift in priorities from geopolitics to democracy and human rights. The United States and the European Union demand a more democratic Turkey as a precondition for enhanced relations. The country's foreign and domestic policy agendas thus interpenetrated at countless junctures. It is against this external intellectual and political context that younger Islamists seem to have been morally and mentally willing and ready to redefine or reshape their political philosophy. "Democracy" is the catchword and the strategy through which these former Islamists seek to change the system at the same time as they change themselves.

Similar influences appear to have led them "to make peace" with the West. The AKP Program and Election Declaration clearly profess the party's pro-Western orientation and the urgency it attaches to Turkey's eventual membership in the EU. But such gestures of friendship for and appreciation of the West in general and the EU in particular among politicians from former Islamist ranks is of immense significance not only for Turkey but also for European and world politics in that it creates opportunities for the promotion of civilisational dialogue between Islam and the West.

It is highly likely that a strong element of pragmatism has also been at work since Islamists, whether of the reformist or the traditionalist genre, would hugely benefit from the enhanced democratic standards that would accrue in Turkey from closer association with the EU. Immediately following his party's election victory, Erdogan took everyone by pleasant surprise with his decision to pay his first foreign visits to the capitals of the European Union.⁷ By personally reiterating his party's commitment to the full implementation of democratic reforms, he hoped to be able persuade EU leaders to give Turkey a firm go-ahead to begin accession negotiations at the forthcoming EU summit on 12 December 2002. Perhaps his hidden wish was to convince his European interlocutors that he had indeed changed, that is, that he was no longer an Islamist.

In short, the founders of the AKP seem to have gone through a period of serious soul-searching and relearning, not only in response to the bitter

⁷ This is in sharp contrast to Necmeddin Erbakan's first official visits as prime minister to Iran, Malaysia and Indonesia, followed by a trip to Libya in which he was embarrassed by the unexpected outbursts of Libyan leader Muammer Khaddafi against Turkey.

lessons of the "soft coup" of 1997, but with the larger picture of global politics and trends in mind. Global trends put a premium on the rule of law, democracy and human rights, values which have been made the benchmark of international legitimacy by the EU and the US. True respect for and genuine internalisation of these rules seem to promise reformist Islamists not only domestic but equally importantly international acceptance and legitimacy. In fact, the AKP party program sounds like a manifesto for democracy and human rights.

The timing of the AKP leadership's claim to "change" was thus a most propitious response by a group of politicians aspiring to the highest levels of national power to the combined impact of external and internal developments. The priorities of the neo-liberal global agenda, on the one hand, and the counter-productiveness of the Erbakan-style confrontation with the system in 1996, on the other, provided them with enough reasons to rethink their original political philosophy. The economic crisis offered them a golden opportunity to reach out to the electorate by moving towards the centre. They did it. And they won.

Who voted for the AKP and why

The prime mover: economics

There is broad agreement among informed observers in and outside of Turkey that the determining factor behind the people's choice was economic. Since 2000, Turkey has been caught in a very severe and prolonged economic crisis. There are two main reasons for it: instability and incompetence bred by the infighting within the coalition government, and the country's vulnerability to some of the negative aspects of globalisation such as the speculative nature of short-term capital flows. The crisis erupted as a financial crisis in November 2000 – the second since 1994 – but unfolded in 2001 to seize all sectors of the economy. This came on top of the negative repercussions on the Turkish economy of the East Asian and Russian crises in 1997 and 1998, respectively, and the huge losses suffered as a result of the devastating earthquake in 1999 with a death toll of around 20,000. All macroeconomic indicators fell drastically in 2001. The GDP shrunk from \$201.4 billion in 2000 to \$146.7 in 2001. Per capita annual income fell from \$2986 to \$2139.⁸ In 2001, the economy registered 9 percent negative growth. Unemployment increased to unprecedented levels not only among the unskilled from the lower classes, but also among young professionals, as businesses and banks collapsed. The IMF came in with a

⁸ G. Uras, "Our per capita income", *Milliyet* (national daily), 23 December 2002, p. 6.

14 The Electoral Victory of Reformist Islamists in Secular Turkey

rescue package. Not surprisingly, the ensuing stability program involved bitter – indeed very bitter – pills, as is usually the case when a country is in crisis.

That Turkish voters made their choice first and foremost under the impact of the deprivations caused by the economic crisis is supported by the findings of the TUSES poll taken in April 2002. 77.2 percent of the respondents in the survey rated “the high cost of living and unemployment” as the most serious problems facing Turkey.⁹ They held the political parties in the parliament responsible for their unhappy lot and on 3 November voted these parties out *in toto*, replacing them with two parties which were not held accountable for the economic downturn.

The economic interpretation of the election results is supported most vividly by the composition of the AKP's votes. Polls show that nearly 40 percent of the votes were protest votes diverted from mainstream parties represented in the outgoing parliament.¹⁰ This 40 percent – the majority of which could reasonably be expected to have internalised secularism as a governmental principle – it is argued, voted for the AKP because of their utter frustration with the traditional governing elite for having drowned them in economic and social misery in the last few years through their incompetence and widespread corruption.

The Islamic vote

Estimates suggest that roughly 30 percent of the AKP votes are transfers from the SP's Islamist grassroots.¹¹ The SP polled an embarrassingly low 2.5 percent. This raises the question of the future prospects of orthodox Islamism in Turkey. Did these voters defect in favour of the reformers to teach the traditionalists a lesson? Will it happen again? Has the whole edifice of *milli gorus* (national view), a doctrine constructed by Necmeddin Erbakan in his personalised Islamist logic, been discarded into the dustbin of history? It is too soon to offer meaningful answers at this point.

The 30 percent Islamist grassroots vote polled by the AKP suggests that identity politics and moral/spiritual values played a role in shaping people's choices. Public opinion surveys suggest that these 30 percent hold conservative worldviews, and more importantly, assign top priority to religious precepts in the conduct of their daily lives as well as in the organisation of society.¹² In other words, the AKP is seen by them as an

⁹ From the TUSES poll.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ From both the Esmer and the TUSES polls.

¹² From the Esmer poll.

Islamist party. The same survey shows that the AKP voters situate their party at the far end of the traditional right on the ideological spectrum. Given this voter profile, the AKP leadership will have a challenging time trying to juggle between the 30 percent Islamist constituency and the 40 percent centrist-oriented constituency while at the same time remaining true to their adopted label of "conservative democrat".

Centre versus periphery

The election results in Turkey are commonly interpreted as the victory of the "periphery" over the "centre". The "centre vs periphery" paradigm denoting inherent social, cultural, political and economic opposition and tension between the Western-oriented modernising elite residing largely in the big cities in western Turkey and the conservative Anatolian countryside, deeply steeped in Islamic thought and culture, has been in usage for several decades in Turkey.¹³ The underlying assumption is that Turkish modernisation was a self-serving program for the benefit of the centre which controlled the state bureaucracy at the expense of a repressed and usurped periphery.

It is true that the modernisation project that was introduced "from above" by the modernising reformers in the 1920s did not penetrate the whole of society. As the centre became more educated, professional and prosperous in the course of modernisation, the periphery remained poor, illiterate and unskilled. The centre embraced reforms; the periphery in Anatolia kept its distance, from secularism in particular, and even put up resistance.

The periphery's revolt first came in the 1950s when the multi-party system became truly operational for the first time. Social change in the form of economic development, urbanisation, schooling, etc. further hastened the periphery's development and capital accumulation, leading to the rise of a new bourgeoisie. Popularly dubbed the "Anatolian tigers", the new bourgeoisie of the countryside boasted thousands of small businesses and their networks in opposition to big business located in western Turkey.¹⁴ This bourgeoisie of small businessmen, tradesmen, professionals,

¹³ Serif Mardin is credited with having introduced this category into the study of Ottoman and Turkish politics. See his seminal essay on the subject, "Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics," *Daedalus*, no. 102, 1973, pp. 169-90. More recently, see N. Vergin, "De-Ruralization in Turkey and the quest for Islamic recognition", *Private View* (a quarterly review of the Turkish Industrialization and Businessmen's Association), vol 1, no. 1, 1996, pp. 50-4.

¹⁴ For one of the best analyses of the link between business interests and Islamic resurgence, see Z. Onis, "The political economy of Islamic resurgence in Turkey: the rise of the Welfare

16 The Electoral Victory of Reformist Islamists in Secular Turkey

etc. now wants not only a bigger piece of the national pie but also to be recognised on their own cultural terms as Muslims, though not necessarily as Islamists. Many members of this loose class paid dearly during the economic crisis. The AKP received the larger portion of its votes in the periphery, that is, the small towns and villages, both well-to-do and relatively poor, as well as in the periphery of the big cities like Ankara and Istanbul.

To recapitulate, a combination of economic, social and moral/spiritual factors and sentiments mobilised the voters towards the AKP. These were the frustration with the traditional mainstream parties held responsible for the economic hardships of the last few years; a conservative worldview in general and devotion to Islam in particular; and the empathy felt by the periphery for a political leadership that has risen up from humble socio-economic origins like their own.

The political spectrum today

As stated previously, five major parties that had represented the centre-right and the centre-left and had dominated the Turkish political scene for the last few decades received a devastating blow on 3 November. The AKP appears poised to fill the vacuum. Yet, only time will tell whether it can become a true centrist party. How did the traditional parties lose the centre and what are their prospects for the future?

First of all, the "Right" and the "Left" began to lose meaning in the 1980s as terms denoting a party's ideological identity. The military regime in 1980-83 engaged in a winning battle with ideological parties at both ends of the spectrum with the exception, eventually, of the Islamists who re-emerged as Erbakan's RP. The end of communism and the rise of neo-liberalism facilitated the process. This ideological dilution resulted in two phenomena: the fragmentation of party politics and the movement towards centrist positions. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Right and the Left broke up into splinter groups – primarily around personalities rather than issues. But even the centrist parties, embracing the centre-right and centre-left, progressively lost ground after 1987.¹⁵ Centrist voters' disaffection paved the

Party in perspective", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 4, 1997, pp. 743-66. He explains that there was a significant rise in Islamic capital or the Islamic bourgeoisie in Turkey during the post-1980 neo-liberal era and that the evolution of the RP into the biggest vote-getter at the 1994 municipal and the 1995 national elections is a parallel phenomenon to and a reflection of the growing power of Islamic business in the Turkish economy and society in the 1990s.

¹⁵ From the TUSES poll.

way for the Islamists' victory in the national elections in 1995, bringing Necmeddin Erbakan into power as prime minister in a coalition government with Tansu Ciller's DYP.

The dynamics behind the decline in voter affection for the centre that emerged in the latter part of the 1980s and that seem to have reached a hiatus in 2002 are not difficult to pinpoint. The fragmentation of the centre-right and the centre-left was perhaps the deadliest blow to the centre. The proliferation of numerous parties around feuding personalities divided votes into meaningless clusters, preventing voters from rallying around a single party on either the right or the left. The second main reason has been the less than lacklustre performance of the Turkish economy, or the inability to sustain the high levels of growth occasionally achieved. It was because of this collective mood of frustration with the failing centrist parties that voters began to turn their attention to parties which had not been tried, namely to the RP in 1995 and the AKP in 2002. Their appeal to the Islamist constituency is certainly not negligible, but that is only one part of the broader, socio-economic reality.

It is against this background that close to two dozen parties ran in the November elections. No mainstream political party claimed a distinct ideology. The prolonged economic crisis of the last two years served as the last straw in their voters' disaffection. A large block of centrist voters from different parties deserted at the first opportunity, voting for the AKP and the CHP, two parties not held accountable for the country's recent travails. The protest votes overwhelmingly went to the AKP. To repeat, 30 percent came from the SP's traditional Islamist ranks; 40 percent from the centre-right and centre-left parties; and 20 percent from young voters who only reached the voting age of 18 after 1999, the year of the last general elections.

The AKP strategists thus diagnosed the political pulse of the country accurately. Voters' persistent alienation from established parties since the late 1980s promised to turn into an exodus under the impact of the economic crisis if an alternative emerged. The AKP portrayed itself as *the* centrist alternative.¹⁶ The party's Election Declaration articulated in no uncertain terms this formal shift to a centrist position, defining the party's political philosophy as "conservative democrat" and elaborating ideas and projects generally identified with the centre.

¹⁶ One of the real surprises of the November elections was the 7.27 percent votes the Young Party (GP) polled. The GP, lead by the dynamic-looking son of a family business conglomerate and founded only very recently, captured over two million votes precisely because it also presented itself as *the* alternative to the *ancien regime* and its sins.

18 The Electoral Victory of Reformist Islamists in Secular Turkey

In short, the confluence of a wide variety of influences and forces seems to have persuaded a group of former Islamists led by Tayyip Erdogan and Abdullah Gul to adjust their strategic power calculations by moving their political philosophy towards the centre. Clearly the strategy and the ideological shift it inherently demanded – from an insistence on Islamic-identity politics, the practice among Islamists until that time – have paid off handsomely.

Unless the AKP makes drastic errors in the next couple of years, all five of the older, established parties defeated at the elections will find it very difficult to recoup their former dominant positions in Turkey's political life. Their revitalisation will require a thorough revamping of their political philosophy and leadership cadres as well as a durable realignment of forces involving reunification within the ranks of the right and the left. At this juncture of Turkish politics the left has almost totally disappeared from the political scene. Since the left-of-centre CHP, the opposition in parliament, has become a Blair-type Third Way'ist party, its support base among the underprivileged has greatly eroded.

Enjoying an absolute majority in parliament, the AKP now formally stands unchallenged to shape and reshape Turkey in the next five years according to its visions and policies. The most likely challenger at the next elections may be the Young Party (GP) which polled an amazing 7.27 percent of the votes only several months after its formal foundation. Its secular appeal to nationalists, the poor and the alienated might easily grow to make it emerge as an alternative to the AKP.

Conclusions

Today, power in Turkey rests fully in the hands of a truly new, untested political party with Islamist roots. It is a credit to Turkish democracy that power at the top has changed hands peacefully following free and fair elections.

Surprisingly perhaps, the AKP government has been received quite enthusiastically by important sections of the society, such as big business and the mass media, generally known for their secular worldviews. Other leading secular institutions such as the bureaucracy, the armed forces and the universities have responded in the best of democratic tradition and bowed to the will of the people, even if their welcome has been of the correct type rather than of the warmest. In other words, the pre-election doomsday scenarios – especially in the international press – which anticipated an Algeria-type take-over by the military in the event of an AKP victory have been proven wrong.

Such scenarios would be unthinkable unless the AKP leadership reneges on the most critical pledge it made for the future prospects of domestic peace and stability prior to the elections: that it is a party based on *man* and not on religion. Needless to say, it is extremely difficult to draw the line between *man* and religion. The true test will hinge on how the relationship between the two, *man* and religion, is treated in public policy. In this regard, long-term projects and policies on public education will be the ultimate test of the AKP government's pledges.

Enjoying absolute majority in the parliament, the AKP government is clearly in a position to pass any legislation it sees fit. With the help of only four votes from among the independents or the opposition, it can amend the constitution. Hence, technically speaking the AKP is indeed in a position to "reshape" Turkey in any direction it chooses. The real situation involves a more complex picture, however, based on an interlocking system of formal and informal checks and balances within the state and society. Societal peace and governmental legitimacy will require patient attention to these multiple variables in the conduct of state affairs. At this point, one can only say that time will test the depth of the dedication of the AKP's governing cadres to their public pledges on such fundamental issues as the place of religion in defining the nature and the structure of the state. Needless to say even their overall attitude and conduct in real life, including the extent of the religious symbolisms they use in their personal life, will carry enormous importance for the long-term religio-cultural profile of the Turkish society.

The AKP government's most impressive move in the last two months has been its diplomatic offensive in the West. All Western governments have welcomed the AKP government, reinforcing the latter's wish to be recognised by the West as the legitimate leader of a Muslim country. In what seems like a twist of irony, this generally warm welcome in European capitals stood in sharp contrast to anti-Islamic sounding comments by Giscard d'Estaing, the President of the European Convention, in early November on the question of Turkish membership of the European Union.