

Could Turkey's new parties change the political balance?

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New political trends are unfolding in Turkey. Recently established political parties have raised hopes for change in the country, impacting the political balance between the government and the opposition. While this is not a foregone conclusion, it is a development worth watching closely, including for the EU.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) has dominated Turkish politics for over 17 years. Nevertheless, with mounting domestic headaches and a moribund economy, the AKP seems to be running out of steam. Support for the party is at an all-time low, while President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's popularity is also in decline.

Turkish democracy is not dead and buried. The EU must continue to engage and support those that are fighting for democratic change.

The establishment of two new political parties by former AKP heavyweights, Ahmet Davutoğlu and Ali Babacan, in December 2019 and March 2020 respectively further jeopardises the AKP voter base. Even if both parties fail to go beyond single-digit support at this stage, they have the potential to shift the balance of power in Turkey. Still, Erdoğan has proved to be a very resilient politician and will push back fiercely against any effort to weaken AKP rule.

At this crucial juncture, the EU must keep its channels of communication with Turkey open despite the many difficulties in their relationship. The establishment

of these two parties, coupled with the success of the opposition in the 2019 municipal elections, shows that Turkish democracy is not dead and buried. The EU must continue to engage with and support those that are fighting for democratic change.

BACKGROUND – DWINDLING AKP SUPPORT

Just at the time when Erdoğan consolidated power through the adoption of an executive presidential system, following the 2017 constitutional referendum, he lost the ability to rule without alliances, due to the need for an absolute majority to be elected. That forced the AKP, which until 2017 did not need political alliances, to join forces with Devlet Bahçeli's Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and form the People's Alliance.

This alliance was successful in securing victory in both the constitutional referendum and subsequent 2018 snap presidential and parliamentary elections. However, the alliance has become a double-edged sword for the AKP. Dependency on MHP support has pushed the AKP towards an increasingly nationalist line, which has alienated other constituencies.

Moreover, the alliance failed to secure victory in the 2019 municipal elections. For the first time, the AKP suffered crushing defeats in major cities including Istanbul and Ankara. This was compounded by a strategic miscalculation by the AKP to rerun the Istanbul election, which backfired. Opposition candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu, won a resounding victory.

The defeat was a severe blow to the AKP and Erdoğan and reflected discontent over the state of the economy

and social burden of hosting more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees.¹ Erdoğan's aura of invincibility took a hammering, which is significant in a country where perceptions about power and strength matter a great deal and shape public opinion.

The issue is not limited to perceptions. While Turkey has serious problems concerning fundamental rights and the rule of law, these have not proven to be decisive factors in the AKP's fortunes so far. However, the deepening economic crisis can prove to be a game-changer in domestic politics. Economic growth and related social policies have always played a central role in the AKP's popularity, especially among the middle and working classes. Turkey's current economic woes have had a profound impact on these parts of society, which is eroding support for the government. Several surveys highlight economic issues as the electorate's top priority.

Erdoğan has tried to push back by mobilising Turkish nationalism. While his and AKP's popularity usually rises after pulling out the nationalist card (during e.g. Turkey's offensives in Syria, drilling operations in the Eastern Mediterranean, the new migration crisis on the border with Greece), opinion polls show that they are temporary peaks.

Ultimately, the AKP is no longer viewed as a solution-oriented party. Rather, it is increasingly seen as being responsible for Turkey's current woes. According to KONDA, a credible and independent Turkish polling agency, 37% of the electorate believes that the political parties (prior to the emergence of DEVA and FP) cannot solve Turkey's problems.²

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An alliance of opposition forces has already managed to leverage this popular discontent to its advantage. The close cooperation in the municipal elections between political parties with very different ideological backgrounds was a unique phenomenon in Turkey's political history. However, this opposition alliance has limited appeal for the AKP's electorate. While frustration among the AKP's traditional voter base is increasing, a conservative political alternative that could meet their demands and expectations has been absent – until now, perhaps.

Discontent is not limited to AKP voters. It has also expanded to key party figures. Given that the AKP has no culture of internal opposition, this was a watershed moment. Several prominent politicians, including former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and former Deputy Prime Minister and economy czar Ali Babacan, became more candid about problems in Turkey and within the AKP.

Although rather timid in their criticism and not targeting Erdoğan directly, their opinions were not tolerated within

the party. Consequently, some of them, including AKP founders, had to resign. Others were expelled. While many senior politicians have left the party since it came to power in 2002, developments since mid-2019 can be considered to have caused a significant split in the AKP, given the weight of these political figures and the potential consequences.

The main question is, will the DEVA and FP be successful in attracting even a small percentage of AKP voters?

On 12 December 2019, Davutoğlu launched the Future Party (FP). Babacan's Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA, which means *remedy* in Turkish) was established on Monday 9 March 2020. Should Babacan and/or Davutoğlu be successful in attracting even a small percentage of AKP voters, this may be a turning point in the country's political balance. The main question is, will the DEVA and FP be successful? While the AKP asserts that both are headed to "the cemetery of political parties", they have the potential to erode AKP support, nonetheless.

STATE OF PLAY – A CLOSER LOOK AT THE NEW PARTIES

Discontent among senior AKP members has been visible for some time. Recent developments, notably the transition from the parliamentary to a presidential system, deepened the divides within the party. Nevertheless, it was the AKP's defeat in the municipal elections that encouraged some of the central figures, including Davutoğlu and Babacan, to act.

Since being forced to resign from the AKP in 2016, Davutoğlu has mainly remained in the shadows, not daring to challenge Erdoğan. Now he is actively promoting the FP and is reaching out to potential allies. While Davutoğlu does have a support base among conservative voters, he is likely to face challenges to broaden it given his contested political track record. Many in Turkey believe that he is partly responsible for the country's democratic backslide since he never challenged Erdoğan. He was also the mastermind of what many views as Turkey's cataclysmic Middle East policy, based on political Islam ideology and neo-Ottoman dreams.

In contrast, Babacan's name is associated with the Turkish economy's golden days. He was side-lined in 2015 as Erdoğan began to surround himself with ultra-loyal yes men. Unlike Davutoğlu, Babacan has succeeded in maintaining quite a positive image in Turkey and abroad due to his economic legacy and keeping out of the spotlight. Consequently, he managed to distance himself from measures that undermine democracy, freedoms and the rule of law.

This does not mean that he is exempt from responsibility as a former senior AKP politician either, however. Babacan's newly created DEVA has close ties with former President Abdullah Gül, who continues to be viewed favourably by parts of Turkish society. While Babacan regularly consulted him while establishing DEVA, Gül has no formal role in the party.

Cooperation between Davutoğlu and Babacan is not an option due to serious ideological differences, but they could be part of a broader coalition of opposition forces. While Davutoğlu seems to be building a conservative political party, Babacan aims to position DEVA as a moderate centre-right party, encompassing different ideological tendencies following the example of the Motherland Party (ANAP), which played a key role in the liberal transformation of Turkey in 1980s. Thus, Davutoğlu's party can be considered as a neo-Islamist conservative party, and Babacan's a *post-Islamist* centre-right party. However, given that this assessment is based on their current discourses, the actual political profile of these new parties will become clearer only once they will deliver concrete policy proposals

Programmes, composition and discourse

Davutoğlu's current discourse and the FP's programme include several interesting elements. There is a strong emphasis on freedoms, human rights and justice. The party aims to restore a parliamentary system of governance in Turkey. There is a commitment to the EU accession process and a strong role for Turkey within NATO.

Davutoğlu's main objective will be to attract disgruntled religious conservative AKP voters and not more moderate ones who remain sceptical about his political turnaround.

Davutoğlu summarises one of the party's main principles as liberal secularism and a pluralistic understanding of religion. Besides former AKP members, the party's founding members also include representatives from different ethnic and religious minorities. Someone unaware of Davutoğlu's past political Islam ideology and strong belief in neo-Ottomanism could even claim that this is a conservative liberal party.

While many in Turkey are sceptical about Davutoğlu's change in religious ideology, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. Still, it is important that a former leading figure of the AKP and political Islam is emphasising such values, including secularism, as it sets him apart from the traditional narratives of proponents of political Islam both in Turkey and elsewhere. If he manages to convincingly pursue the party programme, this could be a new opportunity to revive the failed concept of 'Muslim Democrats', similar to Christian Democrat movements in the West.

That said, Davutoğlu's main objective will be to attract disgruntled religious conservative AKP voters and not more moderate ones who remain sceptical about his political turnaround. Davutoğlu may also struggle to get support from the Kurds. He served as prime minister during Turkish military's operations in mainly Kurdish urban centres that followed the end of the peace process in 2015. This has not been forgotten.

The principles and values upheld by Babacan are very similar to those advocated by Davutoğlu: the rule of law, human rights, freedoms and democracy. The DEVA also supports the idea of an 'enforced parliamentary system', namely, a more democratic version of the parliamentary system that existed before the 2017 constitutional changes. However, unlike the FP, DEVA claims to be a mainstream centrist party.

Babacan's personality as a less ideological politician with a technocrat side plays an important role.

The number of women and young people among DEVA's founders is quite significant when compared to the other political parties. The party has a quota of 35% woman and 20% youth. Moreover, the party programme has clear messages for political and economic reforms. One of Babacan's key promises is to revive economic growth. According to Babacan, this is only possible through democratic reforms. In line with this, the party also supports expanding the rights of Kurds.

Given its positioning as a centrist party, DEVA might have a broader appeal than the FP. Babacan's personality as a less ideological politician with a technocrat side plays an important role here. His success will depend on the party's ability to attract both educated, young and urban voters who are uncomfortable with the current direction of the AKP and moderate, centrist voters.

Turkey has a history of strong centre-right political parties. Before the AKP, parties with a conservative Islamist background had limited support, barring the municipal elections in 1990s. The AKP managed to reach out to voters that were not traditionally supporting Islamist parties, marginalising centre-right political forces. Babacan's DEVA Party aims to regain the electoral territory that was lost to AKP and re-establish a moderate centre-right force in Turkish politics. This will not be an easy task, however.

PROSPECTS – ERDOĞAN DOWN, BUT FAR FROM OUT

With the electorate looking for something new, the FP and DEVA seem to fulfil an emerging political demand in Turkey. Furthermore, their creation demonstrates that democracy in Turkey remains alive, albeit under duress.

This, along with the opposition's success in the 2019 municipal elections, has raised hopes of a return to a more democratic track.

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While neither party is likely to reach the support currently enjoyed by the AKP, they would need far less than that to tip the already very fragile political balance. This is particularly significant for the presidential elections, where an absolute majority is required. Even with the support of the MHP, passing 50% of the vote is becoming increasingly difficult for Erdoğan, who received 52.6% in 2018. The presidential system provides a strong incentive for AKP opponents to unite.

Experience has shown that Erdoğan is not averse to risk-taking, so he might call for early elections in 2021 to try and reboot his power, given that presidential and parliamentary elections are not slated until 2023. Still, unless Erdoğan can revitalise the economy, it would be a huge gamble. Current polls predict that the Mayor of Istanbul, İmamoğlu, could stand a chance against Erdoğan in a future Presidential election, particularly if the opposition forces unite behind him as they did in the municipal elections.

Erdoğan will undoubtedly try to rekindle support for the AKP. A shrewd leader, he becomes more cunning under pressure. Political pressure on competitors, limited access to media for the opposition, and a fierce nationalist narrative are part of his playbook. For example, securing coverage on major TV channels is difficult for parties opposing the AKP, as many of the former are owned by businessmen with close links to the ruling party. Most broadcasters ignored the launch of both the FP and DEVA. Therefore, social media platforms and new media, which are already increasingly popular in Turkey, will be crucial. Personal petty punishments are also on the cards. For example, in January, the management of the Foundation for Sciences and Arts (BSV), which was co-founded by Davutoglu in 1986, was taken over by the authorities.

Political trends, however, are not in Erdoğan's favour. It is doubtful whether he can fix the economy as this would require serious political and economic reform. A new version of Turkey is loading and is likely to have a major impact on internal domestic politics. While this will take time, and there will be many bumps along the way, it is unavoidable. This evolution would carry considerable

implications for relations with the EU, potentially making reform a possibility again. It is important to note that all opposition parties in Turkey, including DEVA and FP, have included explicit references to the EU accession process and EU norms and values in their programmes.

Turkey remains a major strategic partner of the EU. It is crucial that the EU keeps its doors and communication channels open during Turkey's process of change and work towards long-term normalisation. The EU and its member states should continue to engage with all of the political actors and support pro-democracy forces and free media in Turkey. This should include maintaining regular dialogue with the government at all levels, as well as inter-parliamentary discussions.

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The EU and Turkey face many common challenges, including regional security crises, not least in Syria. As the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, stated during his meeting with Erdoğan on 9 March, "it's important to have a frank and open dialogue in order to see how it's possible to overcome the different problems." Thus, despite the current difficulties in mutual relations, Turkey must not be labelled – as some have – a lost cause, or dealt with on a transactional basis, which is increasingly the case. Through sustained dialogue, the EU and Turkey should work to improve and deepen their currently contentious relationship. Ongoing political developments in Turkey offer the EU a new opportunity to play an imperative role in Turkey's democratisation process.

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¹ Operational Data Portal, "Syria Regional Refugee Response > Turkey" (accessed 13 March 2020).

² Ruşen Çakır, "Bekir Ağırdir: 'Seçmenin yüzde 37'si "Var olan bu partilerle gitmez, Türkiye'nin sorunları çözülmez" diyor"', *Medyascope*, 26 January 2020.