

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during September 1-30th 2013

By John VanPool, EGF Turkey and Black Sea Regional Analyst

Key Points:

- *Prime Minister Erdogan announces the long-awaited democratization package. While a step in the right direction, the proposal is lacking with regards to many of the challenges the Republic faces.*
- *The opposition CHP, MHP and BDP voice disappointment with the prime minister's proposals, but none have pulled out of negotiations at the Constitution Conciliation Commission thus far. A positive sign, if any, exists.*
- *Protests continue in the country's major cities, albeit on a more sporadic basis than those in the summer. Reasons behind each demonstration vary, yet the underlying dissatisfaction with the AKP remains a unifying factor regardless of the location.*
- *Syria's civil war shows no sign of ending as infighting continues between the opposition forces.*
- *Turkey tries a different track, making overtures to the PKK-affiliated PYD despite its connections to the separatist group currently in the midst of a ceasefire with the Turkish government.*

Democratization Package

After continued delays, arguments and the PKK-ceasefire hanging over proceedings of the Constitution Conciliation Commission, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan unveiled the AKP's democratization package. The announcement came after months of debate from the four major parties; the Islamist AKP, and main opposition parties: the Kemalist CHP, Nationalist MHP and Kurdish BDP.

As recently as mid-September, the distance between the parties was visible. Both the AKP and BDP insisted the new constitution could not contain "irrevocable" articles as the current one does. Those articles classify the Republic as a democratic, secular and social state in addition to codifying the official language, flag, national anthem and capital.

Amongst the changes to be debated by the Parliament's Constitution Conciliation Commission will be the voting threshold for the national legislative body. Currently, parties must win at least 10 percent of the electorate to have their representatives seated as party members, rather than independents. The BDP, which represents large portions of the Kurdish electorate, is likely to benefit from this change should it occur. This restriction, which is one of the highest in parliamentary bodies worldwide, has been a major grievance of the country's 15 million Kurds. Parties who account for three percent of the electorate will also be allowed to receive state funding, as opposed to the current threshold of seven percent. (Albayrak, "Turkey's Long Awaited 'Democracy Package': The Rundown," *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 September 2013).

With regards to national identity and language issues, also of great interest to the Kurdish minority, the proposal appears to be a very small step in the right direction. In private institutions only, Kurds will be allowed to receive education in their mother tongue. The AKP's proposal also seeks to eliminate the punitive punishments handed out for the use of the Kurdish alphabet, one of the most *Orwellian* aspects of the Turkish penal code. In terms of practicality, neither of these concessions are of much relevance. In

the largely Kurdish southeast, most of the population is priced out of private schools. As for the alphabet, the statute was never truly enforced by the security forces. However small though they are, any sign towards greater inclusion for the country's largest minority is a positive sign at the very least.

Also left out was any mention of decentralizing the government towards regional and local government structures, another long-standing Kurdish demand. According to Human Rights Watch, the package does nothing to end the draconian detention of thousands for their "support" of terrorist organizations such as the PKK. (Webb-Sinclair, "Dispatches: From Turkey, Mixed Signals on Refor," Human Rights Watch, 30 September 2013.) Anything from clapping at a funeral of a PKK-fighter to journalists writing on the organization remain classified as "support" per Turkish law.

Important to his own party's supporters, Erdogan announced that the government would also seek to remove the headscarf ban for public servants and public institutions. It would remain however, for judges, prosecutors, police officers and military members. The issue is of paramount domestic interest in Turkey, as Kemalist norms have long restricted the display of religious symbols in public institutions.

As a gesture to the Alevis, a minority religious sect whose members make up an influential portion of the opposition CHP, including its leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu, a university was renamed in honor of a renowned 13th-century mystic. Meanwhile, the government still refuses to recognize their houses of worship nor grant them an official minority status.

Reactions from the opposition were predictable. The BDP co-chair, Gultan Kisanak, said the package failed to meet expectations and was unlikely to overcome the disputes currently holding back progress to the PKK-ceasefire. The CHP was highly critical at what it sees as the destruction of "nationalist-secular Turkey". ("Government's reform package hit by opposition criticism," *Today's Zaman*, 30 September 2013). The nationalist MHP concurred with this sentiment, but went further in saying that aims to

boost Kurdish rights would lead to the ultimate dissolution of Turkey.

In all, the reform package was likely a disappointment to all minority parties involved. Such is the nature of democracy. This is understandable, given that the changes are largely cosmetic compared to the deep reforms necessary to address the divisions the country faces. Yet change at such a rapid pace is impossible.

Give too much to the Kurds, and the AKP risks alienating the nationalist and Kemalist elements of the MHP and CHP. This is not to mention the memories of military overthrow that likely haunt the AKP's leadership despite their apparent shackling of the generals.

Make no concessions to the Kurds, and the prime minister risks the cease fire with the PKK, one of his greatest achievements. This is especially relevant as Syria's Kurds carve out their own autonomous region in the north of that country.

Finally, as a politician, Erdogan is seeking to pull his country forward and looks good doing it. His image, especially with the country's liberals and the West, took a hit following the heavy handed crackdown in Taksim Square. He is also a politician who is up for re-election soon, when he will push for the presidency. The package, if it truly does anything, reinforces Erdogan's reputation as the grand master of Turkish politics. In the short term, this is good for the AKP. In the long term, it remains to be seen if the outlook is as bright for those who did not cast a ballot for the most decisive Turkish politician since Ataturk.

Protests

Though not on the scale of those that struck Turkey in the summer, protests continue to take place across the country. While there is an under-current of disdain for the AKP-government at most demonstrations, the causes of each outbreak remain varied.

In mid-September, a gathering in the southern city of Antakya to protest the government's stance on Syria left one dead. The death itself was a catalyst for solidarity demonstrations to pop up in Ankara and

Istanbul. Much of the outrage has been directed at the heavy handed police response that has been a hallmark to bouts of unrest that have roiled the country since the summer.

The contentious atmosphere that pervades the country's major metropolitan areas may also have influenced International Olympic Committee's decision to award the 2020 summer games to Tokyo over Istanbul.

Ankara's AKP mayor, Melih Gokcek, emerged with the tired, yet expected government response to the decision. Gokcek took to Twitter to condemn protesters as traitors for their complicity in Istanbul's loss.

While many Turkish citizens were saddened by the loss, protesters gathered in Taksim district of Istanbul reflected the general split in the country's largest cities. A significant number were reported to have celebrated the IOC's decision long into the night. (Minder and Yeginsu, "Madrid and Istanbul respond differently to rejection by Olympics," *The New York Times*, 8 September 2013.)

The running battles and sporadic protests by those opposed to the AKP looks to go on for some time. Activists, regardless of the issue they gather for, have not been totally cowed by the police violence. Nor have they been deterred by government rhetoric, which typically centers on condemnation of protesters as "foreign financed others" seeking the downfall of Turkey. AKP leaders will continue to feel secure in their knowledge that should elections be held today, they would triumph. Yet this attitude misses the point, and gives little credit to the feebleness of organized opposition parties. While they certainly can win elections, AKP leaders' inability to satisfy those outside of their immediate voting bloc shows they have little talent for plural governance.

Syria

Despite considerations from the U.S. and France, it appears the al-Assad regime was granted a reprieve for its use of chemical weapons in late August.

American President Barak Obama, with little popular support at home and an opposition in Syria that includes both the Al Nusra Front and Al Qaeda in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS), kicked responsibility across to the United Nations. With Russian and Chinese backing, it appears the Syrian government will hand over its chemical weapons stocks.

For Turkey, the hope of swift regime change in Damascus quickly ebbed. Prime Minister Erdogan echoed what many of Obama's critics said about the change in tactics from Washington.

"There are certain things being expected from the United States. Obama has not yet catered to those expectations," said Erdogan. He quickly clarified, saying the American president "lacked initiative" towards the Syrian situation.

One can comprehend Erdogan's exasperation. Syria's civil war has brought nothing but trouble for the prime minister. The AKP's once vaunted "Zero Problems" foreign policy is in shambles, the country officially hosts 200,000 Syrian refugees though the real number is likely larger, and a Syrian offshoot of the PKK has carved out an autonomous region along Turkey's southern border.

The risk of conflict between Turkey and Syria's military remains, although prospects of conflict could not be described as imminent. Yet the downing of a Syrian helicopter by two Turkish F-16s on September 14 indicates that a series of misunderstandings or missteps could lead to all out conflict. (Zalewski, "Amid explosions and clashes, volatile Turkey-Syria border gets more dangerous," *Time*, 16 September 2013.) One factor keeping this scenario from playing out is the presence of three NATO missile batteries along the border. Manned by American, Dutch and German units respectively, Syria's military is unlikely to launch any large scale offensive attacks that could harm soldiers from these countries for fear of drawing a U.S. response. For its own sake, Turkey's military leaders want no part of a large scale invasion and occupation of a Syria so riven by armed factions.

These factions continue to battle the al-Assad regime, but have also begun to turn on one another. On

September 18, the ISIS overran the northern Syrian town of Azaz, which had been held by the Northern Storm Brigade, a secular and moderate opposition group. This action mirrors Islamist moves to overrun the more ethnically diverse Kurdish regions of Syria, which have lead to rebel and Kurdish groups fighting one another.

Syrian Kurds see Turkey's support for the Islamist fighters, many of whom receive medical care across the country's border. In an effort to exercise some influence with the well-organized Kurdish groups, Turkey has abandoned its earlier plan of soliciting support only from the Kurdish National Council (KCK). That group, backed by Iraqi Kurdistan's Masoud Barzani, retains equal support with its political rival and PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD). Yet the PYD opposed the KCK's move to join the newly rebranded Syrian Coalition (SNC). The KCK-SNC partnership is significant for the opposition forces, and only came after a year of negotiations in which the SNC finally agreed to drop the word "Arab" from the country's name should they defeat al-Assad.

Turkish leaders are wise to try and gain some traction with the Kurdish factions operating in Syria, especially the PYD. Should the PKK peace agreement fail, Turkey would do well to have interlocutors in Barzani and PYD head Salih Muslem. Media reports of a large shipment of explosives from Syria that were bound for PKK militants in August exemplifies the risks. (Kaya, "PKK attempts to use Syrian agent to set explosives," *Today's Zaman*, 13 September 2013.)

For now, Turkey can only watch and react to the ever changing landscape to its south. Despite the al-Assad regime's plan to hand over its chemical weapons, the civil war will continue by conventional means. While the Syrian government continues to classify the conflict as a stalemate, its superiority of arms will maintain a balance against the more populous, but fractured rebel forces. Ankara has little sway over the most potent armed groups in the conflict, and the best option may be to get the best out of relations with the secular Syrian Kurds. Despite deep mistrust on both sides, if the relationship with Barzani's Iraqi Kurdistan is any indicator, Turkey can work with the

Kurds if their interests align. Such a prospect appears present.
as the only bright spot in a very dark region at

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Director and Founder: Dr Marat Terterov

Email: Marat.Terterov@gpf-europe.com

Avenue Du Manoir D'Anjou 8

Brussels 1150 Belgium

Tel/Fax: + 32496 45 40 49

info@gpf-europe.com

www.gpf-europe.com

www.gpf-europe.ru