

Insights into Turkish domestic and international politics during June 2011

Key Points:

- *Despite the fact that the ruling AKP did not gain the electoral majority it required to unilaterally re-write the country's constitution, the party continues to be the overwhelmingly dominant player in the Turkish political landscape.*
- *As was inevitably the case with Turkey's position towards Libya following prolonged civil conflict in the country, Ankara's position towards Syria is slowly but surely adjusting towards a tougher stance*
- *Turkey continues to keep one foot in Nabucco's door, and the other in bilateral energy arrangements with neighbouring states*

The June 12 elections: fallout with the press and impact on Turkish political landscape

The mid-June election was a culmination of hectic months of campaigning in Turkish domestic politics, with sex tape scandals, alleged insults by the prime minister directed at the CHP's head for being a non-Muslim, and accusations of an Israeli backed conspiracy involving the British magazine, The Economist.

On Sunday June 12, Turks went to the polls for parliamentary elections. Although it was expected that the ruling party would find it difficult to match previous elections' returns due to better organized opposition parties, the returns were widely expected to herald an AKP victory not in terms of 'if' but rather by 'how much'.

On June 2, the London based magazine, The Economist, published an article stating that the best result for Turkey would be the AKP's failure to gain an outright majority in parliament in order to maintain some pluralism and opposition input on the constitution to be drafted later this year. Granted, with sub-headlines like "A vote against autocracy", and specifically calling on Turks to vote for the CHP, the London-based publication's motives clearly could not be called unbiased. However, Prime Minister Erdogan's reaction, typical of his gruff manner towards most kinds of journalistic criticism, while playing well with the Turkish electorate, once again showed his tendency to disparage those who disagree with his policies as conspirators. "This international media", the prime minister said, "as they are supported by Israel, would not be happy with the continuation of the AKP government. Of course they have their hands on Turkey nowadays".

Further compounding the Turkish Prime Minister's war of words with the international press is the fact that numerous journalists are currently detained in Turkish prisons, albeit on totally unrelated charges reflecting many other non-democratic regulations which continue to exist in the Turkish legal system. However, it seems that Erdogan may be altering his approach to such apparently "trivial matters" in light of the AKP electoral victory. The change in tact follows the decision of a Catalca judge just days before the election, who said the prime minister's lawsuit against a performing troupe of Turkish students who called him a street vendor, was not a violation of the country's law of insulting one's honor. That decision came on June 8, and just a day after the AKP's electoral success, Erdogan's office announced that he would be dropping a number of lawsuits against columnists, journalists and politicians who had offended him during the election cycle in an effort to move beyond the election atmosphere and start a new dialogue on constitutional reform.

As for the elections, the AKP victory indicated the country's general satisfaction at the abilities of the party leadership, especially considering that under its stewardship the economy has tripled since 2002, while exports rose from \$36 billion to \$114 billion during the same period. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's CHP fell short of the pre-election estimates gaining only 26%, but still captured 5% more than in the 2007 polls, which is a significant achievement compared to the party's recent electoral performance. Despite the CHP's gains, however, the AKP was the resounding victor in the election capturing 50% of the vote. That being said, the AKP still fell short of the majority it needed to be in a position to unilaterally change the constitution, taking into account the votes gathered by the nationalist MHP and those of the pro-Kurdish BDP "independent" candidates, combined with those attributed to the CHP already mentioned above.

The oath taking ceremony in Parliament on Tuesday June 28 was boycotted by the CHP and BDP, and it remains to be seen what will unfold in the weeks ahead as the parties jostle for a palatable result in the want of satisfying the aspirations of all stakeholders. While the final election results leave the AKP short of an outright majority in which to re-write the country's constitution without the input of opposition parties, they do signify that despite all predictions to the contrary, the party continues to be the overwhelmingly dominant player in the Turkish political landscape.

Ankara's position towards Syria starts to toughen

As was inevitably the case with Turkey's position towards Libya, Ankara's position toward its southern neighbor is slowly but surely adjusting. Turkish leaders understandably hoped for the uprisings in towns throughout Syria to burn themselves out while they continued to maintain ties with the Assad regime. But the continued brutality of the Syrian government crackdown on its own citizens throughout June has slowly elicited a response from Turkey.

On June 9, hundreds of Syrians fled across the border into Turkey from nearby towns after reports of a ramped up military offensive against the town of Jisr al-Shughur in the Idlib province. There are presently more than 12,000 Syrian refugees estimated to be in Turkey, most of whom have fled the fighting in the country. Damascus has yet to implement any true reforms, despite further recent announcements by Syrian President Assad promising such action.

The Turkish response to the crackdown and lack of progress in Syria, though tepid at first, has become resoundingly more vocal and direct following the influx of refugees along its southern border. On June 10, Prime Minister Erdogan said that "The savagery right now... think about it, the images they are playing in the heads of the women they kill is so ugly, these images are hard to eat, hard to swallow," and added that while he had spoken to President Assad, he believed the leadership in Damascus underestimated the situation on the ground in those parts of the country where the crackdown continued. He further stated that Turkey could not defend Syria against a proposed UN Security Council vote due to the Syrian regime's actions against civilians, whilst reiterating that Turkey would continue to remain open for further Syrian refugees fleeing the fighting.

Syria's seemingly uncompromising stance on the domestic rebellion has put Ankara in a difficult position, seemingly forcing the hand of Turkish leaders whose constituents continue to hear of massacre. For its part, Syrian television has been openly claiming that Turkish arms are now being supplied to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, who it claims are one of the main instigators of the unrest. While it is safe to say that although Erdogan has yet to call for his personal friend, Syrian President Assad, to step down, if the crackdown is not halted soon a regional conflict may start to loom. Turkey, it should be mentioned, has considerable leverage in terms of water resources, political clout and NATO's second largest military to sway Syrian decision making. While it would take a considerable escalation on either leader's part for such a state of affairs to occur, we should also remind ourselves that very few persons could have predicted the current situation a mere six months ago.

Energy and pipeline geopolitics: Bulgaria, Turkey, and new hope for Nabucco ?

Bulgaria is considering establishing an energy connection with Turkey via a natural gas pipeline in order to cater to domestic energy market demand, while at the same time waiting for the materialization of projects in the Southern Energy Corridor. Bulgarian Minister of Economy and Energy, Traicho Traikov, estimates that the proposed cooperation between Ankara and Sophia, which will be led by state gas companies BULGARGAZ and BOTAS, could supply Bulgaria with 5 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas annually and will be completed by 2014. In late 2010, Bulgarian Prime Minister, Boiko Borissov, and his Turkish counterpart Erdogan agreed to construct a gas link that would later become part of the Nabucco gas pipeline, funding the section with European financing. Traikov, however, excluded this possibility due to that project's lengthy delays and costs, along with the fact that Azerbaijan appears to be the only realistic gas supplier for Nabucco. These developments arise in parallel to a joint Greek-Bulgarian gas pipeline (IGB) being put forward, while in April Greece and Azerbaijan agreed on a direct gas supply arrangement without Turkey's mediation.

All hope may not yet be lost for the Brussels backed Nabucco project, however, as the much maligned pipeline may have just received a new lease of life following Germany's decision to phase out nuclear power in wake of Japan's nuclear accident earlier in the year. In May, Nabucco's backers announced that the project would be established two years later than planned and exceed its original €7.9 billion cost projection. Setbacks this year (mainly due to difficult talks with gas producers) have deepened doubts about the project, which has been under discussion since 2002 and has not signed any supply deals. The German decision to shut down nuclear power by 2022 and progress in talks with pivotal supplier Azerbaijan appears to have revived interest in Nabucco, however. Furthermore, according to Azeri State Oil Company head, Rovnag Abdullayev, European countries are considering combining two Southern Gas Corridor projects -- Nabucco and ITGI (Turkey, Greece, and Italy). That being said, it is difficult to discern how plausible such a link-up could be as the former project is still not a physical reality.

Disclaimer

The information presented in this report is believed to be correct at the time of publication. Please note that the contents of the report are based on materials gathered in good faith from both primary and secondary sources, the accuracy of which we are not always in a position to guarantee. EGF does not accept any liability for subsequent actions taken by third parties based on any of the information provided in our reports, if such information may subsequently be proven to be inaccurate.

EGF Turkey File
Published by European Geopolitical Forum SPRL
Copyright European Geopolitical Forum SPRL
Director and Founder: Dr Marat Terterov
Email: Marat.Terterov@gpf-europe.com

Suite 1/Level 3, Avenue Du Manoir D'Anjou 8
Brussels 1150 Belgium
Tel/Fax: +322 770 1001
info@gpf-europe.com
www.gpf-europe.com
www.gpf-europe.ru