

Turkish Domestic Politics in 2009: Towards Normalization

EMRULLAH USLU*

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Turkey's domestic political developments in 2009, by situating them against the results and implications of the 2007 national elections. It examines major issues on Turkey's agenda: the redefinition of civilian-military relations, the Kurdish question, the issue of conservative social networks and the Ergenekon investigation. The article argues that while the governing Justice and Development Party previously pursued a survival strategy based on alliances with liberal reformists and the EU to curtail the power of the military, in the wake of the 2007 elections it opted to explore issues of common ground with the military. The developments in 2009, which was a year of harvesting the fruits of this new strategy, show that this strategy worked in regards to the Kurdish question, but it has failed on the issue of conservative social networks, as the military and the government remained embroiled in an undeclared confrontation on this issue.

To analyze the political developments in 2009, perhaps the best place to begin with is the news that deeply shook the Turkish political scene at the beginning of 2010: a *coup d'état* plan that was leaked to the liberal daily newspaper Taraf. According to Taraf, 162 military officers, including 29 high ranking generals, gathered in Istanbul on March 5-7 2003 to discuss possible scenarios on how to force the newly established Justice and Development Party (AKP) government to declare a state of emergency, so that they could topple the elected government and appoint a “unity government” composed of technocrats.

What made this news important is the fact that it highlighted the major events of 2009, most of which revolved around the debate on the future of civilian-military relations. Moreover, the Kurdish question and the tug-of-war between the judiciary and the government were the other two issues that dominated the

* Department of Political Science and International Relations, Yeditepe University, emrullah.uslu@yeditepe.edu.tr

political debate in 2009. In a sense, all three issues are interrelated since they are tied to a bigger debate pertaining to the redefinition of the established state structure. The ways through which the three issues became intermingled throughout the year became so apparent that no one could turn a blind eye to them.

Background

A critical election set the stage for the political struggles of 2009: the 2007 parliamentary elections. During the first four years of AKP government, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan searched for a counterweight against the military, statist elites, and bureaucratic alliance, who considered him an outsider. They were convinced he would undermine the established system and balance of power. Erdoğan succeeded in creating a political balance by pursuing EU reforms and developing better relations with the Western world. In contrast, the state elites attempted to exploit Erdoğan's Islamic background to undercut the legitimacy of the civilian government. In response, Erdoğan promoted swift EU reforms that obtained significant domestic support from liberal intellectuals and among foreign audiences. The EU process helped Erdoğan emerge as a reformer and countered the state elites' argument about his Islamic background. This delicate balancing strategy ended after the 2007 elections, when Erdoğan began leaning towards the nationalist wing in the AKP, which suggested establishing better relations with the domestic power centers, i.e., mainly the military in Turkey.

While Erdoğan was in search of domestic and foreign allies between 2002 and 2007, some state elites and military generals were still busy searching for alternatives to replace him, and they were ready to stage a *coup d'état* if necessary. 2009 was also the year when many of the coup plans were uncovered and were openly debated in the public square. It appeared that at least four coup plans, named "Balyoz", "Ayıışığı", "Sarıkız," and "Eldiven" were planned by different military officers, however they were never carried out. The very fact that such plans were even formulated by some circles within the military substantiates the validity of the AKP leaders' concerns that they were facing existential challenges, hence their need to form alliances to eliminate these very real threats.

2007 Elections: Change in AKP's Balancing Strategy

The 2007 national elections marked a political milestone and would impact Turkish politics in the years to come. Before and after this election, the AKP leaders pursued a double edged political strategy. The AKP calculated that if it maintained a confrontational stance against the military, it would capitalize on its own

victimization in the hands of the Kemalist elites. This would encourage a high level of voter support, which in turn would urge the AKP government to publicly confront the military. At the same time, in the immediate aftermath of the elections, the AKP leadership sought to cooperate with the military and other state elites, presenting itself as forgers of national unity.

After the 2007 elections, the nationalist wing in the AKP toyed with the idea of a new survival strategy for the AKP. Instead of looking for a partnership with the liberal intellectuals and using the EU reform process as a balancing instrument against the establishment, the AKP sought accommodation with the establishment. As part of this non-confrontational policy, the AKP leaders explored a common ground with the military, which was provided by the Kurdish question. The AKP leaders have publicly claimed that the AKP was the only political party that could reunify the Kurdish region with the rest of the country. This was due to the AKP's popularity among the Kurds. The AKP gained a high percentage of the Kurdish vote and beat the Kurdish nationalist Democratic Society Party (DTP). The 2007 elections provided the AKP with the right momentum and political clout to address the Kurdish issue. In fact, the AKP government's campaign motto for the 2007 election signaled its post-election policy: "one flag, one nation, one country." At the same time, the election results raised hope among the military elites that the AKP could indeed serve as a useful instrument for solving the Kurdish question. With this repositioning in Ankara, the AKP and the military explored a common ground to cooperate on the Kurdish question.

Civil-Military Relations

Another major factor setting the stage for the 2009 political debate was the new General Chief of Staff Gen. İlker Başbuğ's stance on two critical problems, namely the Kurdish question and Islamic reactionarism, *irtica*. Regarding the Kurdish question, the Erdoğan government and Başbuğ seemed to share similar views. Unlike many of his colleagues, Başbuğ is realistic enough to acknowledge the social and economic aspects of the problem and has critical opinions on former state policies, which in his eyes failed to prevent people from joining the PKK. Thus, the government and the military finally found common ground on the Kurdish question and were able to deliver a new approach to solve the problem in 2009. Those overlapping perspectives facilitated the AKP's policy of seeking accommodation with the state elites.

On the Islamic reactionarism issue, however, the government and Başbuğ held opposing views. Başbuğ treats Islamic reactionarism as the second most impor-



Photo: AA, Cem Öksüz

The Ergenekon investigation has been another source of tension between the military and the government.

tant threat to the foundations of the nation-state after the Kurdish question. More importantly, he openly declared his position in many public addresses and insisted on implementing those views. In an opening address at a ceremony of the Turkish Military Academy in 2006, Başbuğ made the *irtica* debate public, stating that there was a threat of *irtica* against the state. Since then, Başbuğ has been the foremost advocate of this view. Yet, an overwhelming majority of Turks, including the government, reject Gen. Başbuğ's interpretation. Because Başbuğ seeks to associate moderate Islamic networks and their social functions with Islamic reactionarism, and therefore also a threat to the nation state, large segments of the Turkish public remained unconvinced.

The Military's *Irtica* Plots Exposed

On the issue of how to deal with the Islamic networks, Başbuğ advocated a hard-line policy. Başbuğ asked the government at least to distance themselves from the Islamic networks, especially from the Gulen movement. But the AKP government simply ignored the military's demand, which remained an element of tension in the civilian-military relations. This behind-the-scene tension became public when a plot, which was prepared by Colonel Dursun Çicek, was leaked

to the media. The leaked documents revealed the military's plans to fight the AKP government and the Gulen movement. When the said military document was published, Başbuğ held a press conference and strongly denied the existence of such a document. Yet an anonymous military officer sent the document to the prosecutors. The document, whose authenticity was later confirmed, had been prepared by a colonel who was working at the psychological warfare unit in the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) headquarters. At the very least, these plans demonstrated unequivocally the existence within the Turkish military of groups seeking to curb the activities of religious groups and the military's intention to discredit the government for its support of any such groups.

As the military documents were being published, the public debate was increasingly centered on the question of whether the so-called Islamist danger to the secular state structure claimed by the military and its allies was real or invented. The debate further polarized the society into two main groups: a) supporters of the military, b) groups who stand vehemently against the generals' demands. A significant number of intellectuals positioned themselves into a counter camp to the military and underlined that there is no such danger on the horizon, instead, they highlighted the danger of the militarization of the Turkish political system.

This debate is likely to contribute to the consolidation of Turkish democracy, as the Turkish public no longer automatically accepts the military's viewpoint, such as Başbuğ's insistence on *irtica* as an uncontested truth. As a vindication of this development, today, the open critique of the military and its privileged role in the political system is widely accepted by ordinary people. This may be due to the media's criticism against the military. For the first time in Turkish history, the TSK's approval rates dropped from 80 percent to 60 percent in 2009.

Judiciary vs. AKP Government

The military's struggle against the civilian government is backed by the judiciary and neo-nationalist circles in the media and in academia. The partnership between the military and the judiciary has produced odd results for Turkish democracy. In 2008, the AKP was indicted by the Chief Prosecutor because of Prime Minister Erdoğan's statements over the issue of lifting the headscarf ban. The Constitutional Court avoided by a slim margin closing down the party while

The military's struggle against the civilian government is backed by the judiciary and neo-nationalist circles in the media and in academia

In the Ergenekon indictments, prosecutors claim that under the leadership of three retired generals and well known politicians and academics, a criminal network was formed to operate against the civilian government

adjudicating that the party had become the “hot-bed of anti-secular activities.” Accordingly, the party’s state funding was reduced in half. The republican-secularist elites now take this ruling as the basis for their argument to discredit the AKP government and its policies.

The battle between the AKP and the judiciary reached its peak when the Kemalist members of the High Council of

Judges and Public Prosecutors (HSYK) engaged in a confrontation with the Minister of Justice, the president of the HSYT, on the issue of changing the post of some public prosecutors who had been investigating some critical cases that were related to the military. The cases include the Ergenekon investigation in İstanbul, an unsolved murder investigation in Diyarbakır, and the Erzincan investigation where a prosecutor arrested several military officers for their alleged involvement in organizing a plot against a moderate Islamic movement in Erzurum. The secularist HSYK members stepped back under public criticism and the HSYK crisis ended temporarily.

The Ergenekon Investigation

In 2009, in addition to the military’s position on Islamic networks, the Ergenekon investigation has been another source of tension between the military and the government. In 2007, two public prosecutors launched an investigation into a neo-nationalist criminal network, involving military and police officers, politicians, media members, labor union leaders, and academics. As part of the Ergenekon investigation into a clandestine criminal organization embedded deep within the state and charged with plotting to topple the democratic government, Turkish police found a huge cache of buried weapons and ammunition, including C-4 explosives and light anti-tank weapons.

In the eleventh wave of arrests, on January 22, 2009, 40 people were detained including 10 police officers, nine active duty military officers, and a union leader accused of being one of the network’s financiers. It was claimed that among those arrested were two assassination teams consisting of police officers from Special Forces units and the military.

This investigation was finalized in 2009 and the prosecutors finished writing three indictments that are 5000 pages, which provided a snapshot of Turkey’s

“deep state” structure. In the Ergenekon indictments, prosecutors claim that under the leadership of three retired generals and well known politicians and academics, a criminal network was formed to operate against the civilian government. The criminal network used its influence on the military structure in two ways. First, for the long term goals of the network, it recruited from the young military cadets and officers to maintain its operational abilities. Second, for its short-term goals, the Ergenekon network stole weapons from the military, utilized the military intelligence system, provided military training to its civilian members, established contacts with the mafia members, and used the military know-how to create chaos so that the civilian government could not govern the country.

Most of the military members of Ergenekon investigation appear to be the officers who were deployed in the Southeastern part of the country during the 1990s. They are the ones responsible for taking extra-legal measures against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the local population. Thus, at least one direction of the investigation focused on the so-called ‘unsolved political murders,’ which were committed throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. What enabled a refocus on these cases is that former military informants confessed to what they did in Southeastern Turkey. For instance, Abdulkadir Aygan, a former member of the PKK, who later became a member of the clandestine gendarmerie intelligence unit known as JITEM, confessed to the media that when the retired Colonel Abdulkadir Kirca was the head of JITEM in Diyarbakir, the unit conducted dozens of executions.

On the national political scene, the Ergenekon investigation turned into a political battle between the government and the main opposition party, Republican People’s Party (CHP). The CHP leader, Deniz Baykal, on many occasions stated without any hesitation that he was the lawyer of the Ergenekon detainees and gave his full support to an alleged organization, which was being investigated for acting as a criminal network. Baykal stated that “these generals and well known figures were arrested not because of their alleged involvement in a criminal organization but because of their opposition to the government.” In response, Prime Minister Erdoğan warned Baykal against influencing the trial process, and added, “if you are the lawyer for the Ergenekon members, I am the prosecutor of this investiga-

Most of the military members of Ergenekon investigation appear to be the officers who were deployed in the Southeastern part of the country during the 1990s

In 2009, perhaps one of the few areas that the government and the military leaders found a common ground, or at least sought to reach a common understanding, was the Kurdish question

and some intellectuals continue to accuse the government of deliberately promoting the Ergenekon investigation to “punish” the military.

The Kurdish Initiative

In 2009, perhaps one of the few areas that the government and the military leaders found a common ground, or at least sought to reach a common understanding, was the Kurdish question. Gen. Başbuğ, on several occasions, underlined that the issue of terror had political and economic dimensions, which needed to be addressed. Both the civilian and military leaders have come to realize that domestic and international conditions have made it imperative for Turkey to solve the Kurdish question.

On the international level, the US is withdrawing from Iraq and wants to leave a stable energy providing country behind. Correspondingly, Turkey is becoming an international hub of energy transportation through a variety of pipeline projects in accordance with the US and European policies aimed at seeing a stable and secure corridor through Turkey. But the existence of the PKK in northern Iraq and the Kurdish question in Turkey create risks for such projects. Because international players want to remove any such risk as soon as possible, they support the implementation of policies that could bring about a swift peace and stability to the region.

On the domestic level, the Kurdish frustration with the long standing conflict has transformed into high expectations from the government to end the violence. Except for the PKK supporters, Kurdish intellectuals and community leaders have raised their voices in favor of ending the violence. On the Turkish side of the spectrum, leading Turkish liberal intellectuals further heightened expectations by bringing the Kurdish debate into the public sphere. The rarely established consensus between the military and the civilian government paved the way for implementing more comprehensive policies toward the Kurdish question and further increased

the openness of the domestic political context to launch a “Kurdish initiative.” At the same time, the National Intelligence Service (MIT)’s active engagement to prepare the ground for such policies is complemented by the like-minded views of the President and Prime Minister, as they are ready to take politically risky steps.

Against this background, the AKP government launched a “democratic initiative” to address the Kurdish question. The initiative includes short term, mid term and long term objectives. In the short term, the government allowed prisoners to speak in a language other than Turkish with their visitors. The government began broadcasting in different dialects and languages with the launch of the TRT 6, the state-run Kurdish-language channel. In addition, with the government’s incentive, the Higher Education Council (YOK) has made the decision to allow universities to offer courses in Kurdish language and literature.

The mid-term objectives are more related to human right issues, which include forming a new, independent Human Rights Commission that aims to investigate applications related to discrimination against minorities; ratifying a part of the UN torture convention; amending the law so that children who throw stones during protests will no longer be prosecuted under counter-terrorism laws; and instituting a mechanism to report complaints about security forces.

While addressing the Kurdish question, the AKP government failed to convince its Turkish constituency that expressed resistance against the ruling government’s initiatives. As the AKP government launched the Kurdish initiative, pundits underlined that the mood and the mode of the Kurdish initiative will be as important as its content, since the decades-old Kurdish problem and its solution are surrounded by psychological barriers that need to be addressed. The reason behind the Kurdish initiative is the AKP government’s goal to alleviate the sufferings of the Kurdish people. This is certainly a positive step toward addressing the problem; however, the Kurdish community will not be fully satisfied until Turkish society recognizes that mistakes were made against Kurds in the past.

As part of a long-lasting war strategy, in the last 30 years, governments have deliberately propagated the belief that the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) is a terrorist organization, controlled by outside forces, hoping to divide Turkey. Most Turkish people, perhaps many (AKP) deputies as well, believe in this propaganda. Such propaganda has created a culture of conspiracy in Turkish society, which now functions as a psychological barrier among Turks. This myth needs to be overcome as the first step toward addressing the Kurdish problem. Parallel to this belief, because of psychological warfare propaganda, the majority of Turkish

One of the biggest obstacles facing the AKP government is to find a way to change Turkish attitudes and the culture toward the PKK and Kurdish nationalist parties

people have the deeply held belief that the Democratic Society Party (DTP) is a Trojan horse that sneaked into the democratic system to help the PKK achieve its aim of dividing the country. Therefore, one of the biggest obstacles facing the AKP government is to find a way to change Turkish attitudes and the

culture toward the PKK and Kurdish nationalist parties. Perhaps it might prove more difficult to change the existing beliefs of Turkish society with regards to the PKK and Kurdish political parties than changing the Kurds' distrust toward the Turkish state.

Knowing that Turks have a deeply held distrust of the PKK, Turkish nationalist circles, including Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), exploited this deep distrust against the AKP government. MHP's campaign might mobilize a new nationalist wave, which might render the peace process more complex and difficult than ever. In particular, the AKP government, so far, has failed to address the following arguments that are deeply rooted among the Turkish public, "We have not done anything wrong against Kurds," "Kurds are first-class citizens; they can be generals, deputies, bureaucrats and even the president of Turkey," and "We Turks suffer, too, but we did not take up arms against the state."

A case in point is the debate on the surrendering of thirty four PKK militants and how it fed Turkish skepticism toward the government's initiative. The pro-Kurdish DTP turned this event into a victory celebration, while Turkish voters in the West reacted to this development negatively. The AKP government failed to develop alternative policies to convince the Turkish public about the immediate outcome of the PKK's surrender. What was also remarkable was that during the most heated part of the debate, the imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, also got involved in the process and agitated Kurds to start street protests. This episode forced the government into a corner and it had to reconsider its policies, which was a stark demonstration of the complexity and frailty of the Kurdish opening. Later, the Constitutional court's decision to shut down the DTP further limited the options in the hands of the AKP government to finalize the Kurdish initiative.

Conclusion

The year 2009 was the year for harvesting the fruits of AKP's new initiatives to improve relations with the military, instead of following their previous policy

of looking for an ally from outside of Turkey, such as the EU and/or the US. This strategy has worked in regards to the Kurdish question but failed on the issue of conservative social networks, as the military and the government remained embroiled in a confrontation. Thus, on the question of greater representation of conservative demands in the public sphere, the AKP government had to continue its struggle to curb the military and judiciary's resistance. In addition, the AKP had to fight against plots aimed at the civilian government. So far, enjoying wide public support on this issue, the AKP leaders have managed to keep the government running and effectively fought against these plots.

On the Kurdish initiative, the AKP government has successfully established a coalition among key government institutions, i.e. the military, police and the national intelligence unit. However, the government failed to convince Turkish public opinion that the Kurdish initiative is worth pursuing. Overall, it would not be a mistake to define the year 2009 as the year of opportunity for addressing the Kurdish question, but a lost year for bridging the secular and conservative gap. In other words, 2009 was the year of both hope and polarization for Turkish society.