



**TURKISH INDUSTRIALISTS' AND BUSINESSMEN'S ASSOCIATION
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THE JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY: THE FIRST YEAR IN POWER

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*TUSIAD-US, throughout the fall season distributed a series of opinion papers, evaluating Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's first year in office. The previous papers were written by **Faruk Selcuk** on economic performance, and by **Gencer Ozcan** on foreign policy. This paper is the last of the series, addressing domestic politics. All three papers are available at [TUSIAD-US website](http://www.tusiad.us).*

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When the Justice and Development Party scored an electoral victory about a year ago, this was met with contradictory feelings of relief and anxiety. The reasons for the relief were obvious: Turkey had gone through an uneventful election that had produced, if through the unique features of the electoral system favoring bigger parties, a one-party government. In a country in which unstable, ineffective coalition governments rife with internal quarrels had been the order of the day since the 1991, having one party obtain a comfortable parliamentary majority spelled relief. The reasons for anxiety were equally obvious. AKP (as the party had come to be known by its initials in Turkish) came from a lineage of political parties that were religiously oriented. Although the leadership of the party, established only a few months before the elections, had stated time and again that they were not a religious but a conservative democratic party, suspicions among the secular Turkish establishment that the new party had a religious agenda were strong.

There were other concerns as well, however. Turkey had been working to achieve the conditions depicted in the EU's Copenhagen criteria in order to get a date to commence with accession negotiations. It was not clear that the new party, whose leader had often made anti-EU remarks in the past, would treat EU as a priority item on the agenda. More generally, the foreign policy orientation of the government was unknown, causing concern and consternation among the bureaucratic and military elites. Turkey had also been implementing an economic restructuring and stability plan to bring inflation under control and to put the Turkish economy on a pattern of healthy growth. Many were concerned about the

commitment of the new government to continue the program that called for austerity and budgetary restraint for the foreseeable future. Thirdly, there were concerns about the competence of the majority party and the government they would put together. Many of the deputies, let alone having had earlier parliamentary experience, had not been engaged in active politics before. Those that claimed to have political experience had usually been involved in local, not national government. Finally, the head of the party, Tayyip Erdogan, had not been able to offer his candidacy during the election owing to a ban on his political rights deriving from a conviction for having violated certain provisions of the Political Parties Law. The ban had not expired at the time of the elections. Failure to become a deputy stood in the way of his becoming the prime minister, an enigmatic situation running counter to the Turkish tradition that the head of the majority party becomes the prime minister. It was not clear how a proxy prime minister would work out until such time when Mr. Erdogan could be elected a deputy and assume the job of the prime minister.

A year later, many of the apprehensions about the new government appear to have receded to the background, although Turkey is not spared of the occasional tensions that arise between the government team and segments of the “secularist camp.” The performance of the government is found to be satisfactory by many observers. To begin with, until he was elected to the parliament after the repeat of an election in a district where the original election had been annulled by courts, Mr. Erdogan managed to stay out of the limelight and allowed his trusted associate Abdullah Gul to run the government. After he became a deputy, his ascension to premiership was uneventful, Mr. Gul became the foreign minister, many members of the cabinet kept their posts.

From the very beginning, the AKP government has shown a keen interest in enacting legislation needed to bring the laws of Turkey into conformity with those of the EU. Arguing that much work needed to be done in this area, the prime minister kept the parliament working throughout most of the summer in order to get through many bills that had been waiting to get enacted. The dedication with which he has acted has won him recognition in the EU circles, including comments that these policies have moved Turkey closer to the EU negotiations than ever before. In contrast to Mr. Erbakan, the leader of the religiously oriented Welfare Party and briefly the prime minister in an earlier coalition who had pursued dreams of an Islamic solidarity bloc, the current government has shown neither a particular proclivity to favor Islamic countries nor a desire to modify the close relations that exist between Turkey and Israel.

The most difficult problem the government encountered in the field of foreign policy has been whether the United States should be allowed to use Turkey’s facilities in an operation against Iraq and whether Turkey itself should join the military operation in some capacity. The Abdullah Gul government, mobilizing parliamentary approval, allowed the US to start refurbishing Turkish airbases and port facilities with a view to using them in a planned future operation against Iraq. This was followed by intensive negotiations regarding the conditions under which US troops would be stationed in Turkey, cross into Iraq, how Turkish troops would take part in the operation and how Turkey would be compensated for its part in the operation. These questions were all based on the assumption that Turkey would implement the next logical step of getting parliamentary approval for the use of its territory for foreign troops and the sending of Turkish troops to another country. True, there seemed to be widespread domestic opposition to accommodating the American requests, including among the ranks of the government party, but it was assumed that the prime ministers would see the bill through the Grand National Assembly. Surprisingly, however, the bill failed when

abstentions were counted were as negative votes, a convention instituted by an opinion of the Constitutional Court at an earlier ruling. In this outcome while some saw a deliberate game of deception, most felt that it was political blunder deriving from miscalculation. This unexpected outcome led to critical responses on the side of the US, but relations were gradually restored to normalcy. A couple of months later, the Erdogan government agreed to send peacekeeping troops to help the Americans and managed to get clear-cut parliamentary approval. Initially enthusiastic about taking advantage of Turkish support, the US soon developed second thoughts on the matter when affecting consensus in Iraq's Governing Council regarding the presence of Turkish troops in Iraqi soil proved impossible. Some observers note that, in this way, the Turkish government has been successful in avoiding the use of its territory for an operation against Iraq, in managing to patch up its relations with the US afterwards while not sending peacekeeping forces into Iraq after all.

Turning to the economic policy of the government, the initial fears that Turkey was getting another populist government not familiar with the intricacies of doing business with the international financial institutions and not committed to the economic reform program has proven to be unwarranted. Not unlike previous Turkish governments, the AKP governments have made it known that life without the IMF constraining the economic policies of national governments would be more pleasant and that they would try to break away from the IMF yoke at the earliest possible date. But behind this rhetoric has been an awareness that the Turkish economy must rest on more stable institutional foundations and that the high rate of inflation and high interest rates must be brought down. While making adjustments in the programs to serve its political needs and committing occasional mistakes possibly for lack of experience, the government has managed to continue the implementation of the economic reform program. The rate of inflation and the interest rates have continued to come down. To his credit, the prime minister has been making it clear to the electorate that conditions have changed and people should no longer expect the government to be a major source of jobs and money for unrestricted social welfare policies. The government has also emphasized its commitment to fight endemic corruption in the economy. The government party itself has come under no major charge of corruption but otherwise the rhetoric has to bear fruit yet.

The most problematical aspect of the Erdogan administration has become manifest in the political domain where the deep suspicion of the secular state establishment of the ulterior religious motives of the government has continued to prevail. The president of the Republic, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, has been strict in not approving appointments of high-ranking bureaucrats that appear to have close links with religious orders. Similarly, there have been many occasions at which the president has vetoed laws enacted by the legislature, sometimes on legal grounds but more often on grounds of judgment. The legislative proposals brought before the parliament are usually eyed with suspicion and the ways these would undermine the secular order are carefully scrutinized. In recent months, two critical bills, both in the field of higher education, have elicited considerable debate and reaction. The first one was the preparation of a new higher education bill without informing the universities of its contents. When the proposal was eventually revealed, it was deemed unacceptable by a unanimous chorus of university administrators, arguing that the proposal was but a pretext for the government to appoint its own men to the administration of the state universities, still the backbone of the higher educational system. After much heated debate, the government has withdrawn the bill and agreed that a new bill should be prepared by the universities and then evaluated by the government before it is submitted to the parliament.

The second issue of contention has been about changing the conditions under which the graduates of vocational high schools are admitted to the universities. The current system favors these students in their seeking admission to fields related to their vocational training and discourages them from going into other areas. The problem derives from the fact that Preacher Training Schools whose numbers far exceed any need Turkey might have, are also classified as vocational schools. For a long time, these schools have served as no more than high schools where religious education is offered. It is suspected that their graduates have an unusual tendency to sympathize with religious parties. Some skeptics have argued that the government's move is designed to place more of these students into faculties where the graduates expect employment in the state machinery like the Ministry of Interior. In this way, presumably, the state would be gradually taken over by cadres not dedicated to the secularist legacy of the republic. The proposal proved to be extremely unpopular with the secular establishment. The military leadership could not restrain itself in issuing highly critical remarks. The proposal was withdrawn.

The government, to its credit, has been careful so far not to let tension generating disagreements evolve into highly divisive, irreversible fights. One may ask whether the government sometimes fails to anticipate the deeply divisive outcome of some of its proposals. It probably does. Why then, does it proceed anyhow? Three explanations may be offered here. To begin with, the AKP itself represents a coalition of voters that include, among others, a religious\true believer contingent. It is conceivable that some of the proposed legislation is developed to cater to their wishes although the public reaction is highly predictable. These proposals are released to the public before they are formally considered in the Council of Ministers and sent to the parliament. They are then withdrawn indefinitely or for revisions. In this way, the radical constituencies may be shown that their preferences were given positive consideration but achieving what they demand is simply impossible at this time. Second, the government itself may be testing to see what is and is not possible in its search to loosen the resistance to the presence of religion in public life. It may also deliberately put forth somewhat radical proposals and then negotiate toward what it deems acceptable in the first instance. Finally, by putting forth proposals one after another, it may be working to reduce resistance to policies that accord greater legitimacy to religious considerations in public life. The secular establishment, the government may hope, will run out of steam in this never-ending battle. Furthermore, the secular establishment has become nervous, erratic in its responses, impatient and sometimes impolite in discourse, threatening in its tone and less than democratic in its approach. Such deportment has only made the government appear to be comprised of peaceful, reasonable people.

In its first year of office, the AKP government has fared much better than anyone would have expected when it took office. Occasional polls show that its support has gone up rather than down. The opposition, on the other hand, has been losing votes. The oncoming local elections in the March of 2004 will constitute a new test case for how the voters view the government party. Current expectation is that it will pass the test with flying colors.