

**POMED CONFERENCE**  
**“Turkey’s Political Crisis and Broader Implications  
for Middle East Democracy”**  
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My remarks are going to be personal.

**Broader context leading to AKP’s rise**

- The end of the cold war
- Acceleration of globalisation
- Social, economic and demographic transformation taking place within Turkey
- Turkey’s EU/democratization process
- Turkish economy’s solid integration with the Western economies

**The factual framework**

AKP came to power as a result of this broader context, domestic developments and failure of the centrist parties playing a crucial role. AKP gave the impression that it had understood the dynamics that led to their electoral victory.

Their performance during the first 3 years of their 1<sup>st</sup> term was impressive almost on all fronts. Especially, their commitment to the EU process was seen by non-AKP supporters as a strong sign refuting the concerns that the AKP had a hidden, radical agenda.

While AKP was making all these bold moves, it was supported by not only its own constituency but also by the business community, the liberal and intellectual circles in the country, and the international community. The irony of this period is that such bold democratic reforms have been carried out by a party that has an Islamic pedigree; a party that has been accused of using democracy to achieve its own so called “Islamist” objectives.

However, starting from the Fall of 2005, the AKP showed signs of fatigue and slowed down the reform process. The negative signs coming from some prominent members of the EU despite the start of the negotiations, and the failure of making process on the Cyprus issue, in spite of serious political risks taken by AKP, played definitely a role in this change of attitude.

Unfortunately, during the last 3 years, in total contrast to their performance during their first 3 years, the AKP has failed to demonstrate that their understanding of democracy goes beyond their immediate, mostly religious, agenda items such as the headscarf issue, the imam-hatips (religious schools), and taking over control of the government agencies and universities.

On the domestic front, despite a very successful record in many areas, the AKP government has created unrest among the secular segments of the society. The secular camp does not consist of only the military and the main opposition party (CHP). It is much broader than this, as was demonstrated by a number of massive anti-AKP demonstrations, which took place in major cities prior to the elections last year.

Some of these people or groups are basically those who are losing ground because of the consolidation of democracy as well as the changes taking place in the society. However, most of the people who are against AKP have genuine concerns that AKP has a hidden agenda and is taking Turkey in an Islamic direction.

Unfortunately, the AKP hasn't been able to assure these groups. Their rhetoric and obsessions with religiously driven policy issues, their insistence on hiring people from their own religious grassroots movements for government positions, and the actions of some of its members have caused legitimate concerns among secular groups.

AKP has also missed a golden opportunity by misusing its legislative power after the elections in July last year. Instead of going for a broader constitutional change encompassing the aspirations of a much broader population and addressing many shortcomings of the Turkish democracy, they focused on their narrow, religiously driven agenda, namely, removing the ban on the headscarf.

## **Some observations and remarks based on the current picture**

It is clear that AKP is a product of a Turkey that is becoming politically more democratic and transparent, socially more urban and conservative, economically more private sector oriented and better integrated with the rest of the world.

If we believe that the 5 main trends I referred to at the beginning of my speech are irreversible, then, AKP or similar parties are likely to play significant roles in Turkish politics in the years to come. Therefore, closing AKP will not be consistent with the economic, social and political realities, which are products of these irreversible trends.

Moreover, the election results of last year and the most recent polls indicate that AKP enjoys strong popular support despite being in power for almost 6 years. It seems that AKP is not a temporary phenomenon and has to be understood as such. Therefore, more efforts need to be made in order to further integrate AKP into the system rather than considering AKP as a by-product of some coincidental developments.

I'm not an expert on the Muslim world but it's widely known that the Turkish experience in consolidating democracy in a Muslim society has been very closely watched in the Middle East. Impediments to this process will definitely have negative implications in these countries. This is true, especially, considering that the AKP government has placed more emphasis on the Islamic world and Turkey's neighbors in formulating its foreign policy. The Iraq war made this a lot easier. There has been no significant change in Turkish foreign policy but a change of tone has been observed.

Despite all these pressing issues, Turkey's self-confidence has become highly visible as a result of a long-lasting stability, which led to a strong economic recovery until last year. Just to give you some figures, the Turkish economy has grown by over 7% per annum between 2002 and 2007. Turkey today is the 17<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world with a GDP of US650 billions. Turkey's foreign trade has reached 55% of its GDP revealing how well the economy performed, and how much Turkey is integrated with the rest of the world. Turkey is increasingly becoming the economic epicenter of a highly dynamic Eurasian region. If the current trends continue, Turkey is going to be the world's 12th largest economy by 2050, surpassing Italy in real as well PPP terms.

Also, the new activism in foreign policy has demonstrated that Turkey has a role to play in most regional as well as some global issues. Turkey's recent focus on the Middle East and intensification of relations with Russia don't mean that Turkey is about to turn its back on the West. Turkey's new activism is a response to structural changes in its security environment since the end of the Cold War. And, if managed properly, it could be an opportunity for Washington and its Western allies to work with Turkey when dealing with the broader Middle East, Caucasus and Central Asia.

Turkey is part of the Western camp with its history, economy, democracy and its fundamental institutions. Nearly 80% of Turkey's foreign trade is with the West, 60% of it being with the EU. 85% of FDI comes from the EU and the US. Of the 22 million tourists visiting Turkey, again, 75% are from the West.

I have no concern about the future direction of Turkey. I hope the AKP can manage the process more skillfully by consolidating its place in the center and focusing more on democracy and the EU process rather than its narrow religious agenda. Also, I hope that a credible political opposition will emerge out of this fragmented picture that we see today. I believe protecting secularism is crucial. Yet, consolidating democracy is equally important. While there can be secularism without democracy, secularism is a precondition for any democracy.

Also, I must underline that our western allies have a role to play if they want Turkey to stick to its democratization and liberalization process. This is obviously a message to the Europeans as they have to develop a more constructive approach, with a long-term view, with respect to Turkey's EU process. The US, on the other hand, has to understand the new realities of the country and develop strategies taking into account local sensitivities in order to better communicate and work with Turkey.