



# CRYSTALLIZING FAULT-LINES: TURKEY'S DEMOCRATIC DURABILITY AT RISK

*Ozan Serdaroglu*

*In the aftermath of the anti-governmental Gezi demonstrations of May-June and the conclusion of the Ergenekon trial earlier this month, clear fault-lines are crystallizing in the Turkish political landscape, with parties reinforcing the divide by shoring up their respective core support bases. This trend brings with it the attendant danger of a more polarized Turkey and ushering in an ineffective political system where political elites are unable to build consensus among diverging social demands. Considering the possible negative impacts of this situation on Turkey's democratic durability, the EU would do well to recognize the new political reality emerging in Turkey by further engaging with the country, not turning away from it.*

Both the Gezi events and Ergenekon trial have ushered in a new era in Turkish politics. While the Gezi demonstrations of May-June were especially striking in their size and spontaneity, indicating the degree of discontentment toward the government, the conclusion of the Ergenekon trial in early August added new strains to the political situation. A total of 254 defendants composed of military officers, political figures, and journalists were convicted for plotting a military coup against the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) government, the sentences provoking outrage among secularists and nationalists. Indeed, amid the AKP's consolidation of power, clear fault-lines are crystalizing in Turkish politics and society that are endangering the country's democratic durability.

## An Age of Exclusionary Politics

"Exclusionary politics" has now become the main political trend in Turkey, with the major political parties reaching out only to their core constituencies and developing strategies on an antagonistic basis, a trend that has accelerated since the Gezi demonstrations and Ergenekon trial. On the government's side, the new discourse is that the AKP is the only legitimate body representing the whole of the country, while its challengers are branded "illegitimate" and threats to a stronger Turkey. In the lead up to the forthcoming 2014 (presidential and municipal) and 2015 (legislative) elections, the AKP is likely to build its election campaign by discredit-

ing the other parties and the sensibilities they represent, arguing that it alone represents the dominant values of Turkey; receiving 50 percent of the vote two years ago, the success of this strategy depends on maintaining and galvanizing this support at the cost of alienating those—the other half of the electorate—whose sympathies do not lie with the AKP.

Exacerbating the state of exclusionary politics practiced by the AKP is the fact that the opposition, notably the Turkish-nationalist and pro-Kurdish groups, have not been willing or able to reach out and gain support beyond their core constituencies. This prevents the formation of a strong political group that could represent a serious alternative to the AKP's stranglehold on power. The reason lies in the incompatibility between the core support bases of the pro-Kurdish BDP (Peace and Democracy Party), the secular/republican CHP (Republican People's Party), and the conservative/nationalist MHP (Nationalist movement party). Notwithstanding press reports on a potential bloc between the CHP and MHP, their respective electorates are very different: the CHP represents a modern, secular community turned westward, and is also seeking support from the Alevi minority habitually on bad terms with the MHP, while the MHP is more conservative and is in fact closer to the AKP, except for it harboring a more nationalist and pro-military sentiment. An alliance between the CHP and MHP is therefore politically risky as it may prompt a questioning of their "representativeness" among their supporters. However, the two parties may see this as the only chance to oust the AKP at the next elec-



tion and so seek to create a common nationalistic discourse to provoke an electoral reaction against the AKP's pragmatic handling of "national cases" such as the Cyprus or Kurdish issues. In regard to the BDP, its strategy depends on the outcome of the AKP's Kurdish opening. Should Kurdish demands not be fulfilled, this may bring about conflict with the AKP, with the result that armed violence could erupt once again in the country's southeast.

The above parties and their electorates represent the main fault-lines in Turkey, divisions which have always been prone to increasing demand stress on the political system by creating an impasse in which political elites are unable to counter-balance very divergent social expectations. In the pre-AKP political system, guarded by the military and its judicial partners, the legal framework was formed in such a way so as to ensure national unity by keeping the demand stress at manageable levels. Specific social demands—whether cultural, class-based, or religious—that risked deepening fault-lines were thus prevented from emerging on the political agenda. The novelty of recent developments is that these lines are now being deliberately exploited for political stakes, a process that is occurring in parallel with the breakdown of the "securitarian" political system formed to alleviate the cleavages present in Turkish society.

## Return to the Europeanization Process

The AKP has always been motivated by the mantra of transforming Turkey and creating a new political and economic order. While it initially received EU support in undermining the old securitarian system, it has utilized the accession process to become the dominant political force in the country. Having attained this status, the AKP seems to no longer seek the backing of European institutions. On the contrary, the government is demonstrating a reluctance to ameliorate EU-Turkish relations, which were strained after the anti-Turkey membership stances of Presidents Sarkozy and Merkel and, more recently, in the light of recent events.

It is now time for the EU to look afresh at Turkey. EU institutions should take into account that established power relations in Turkey are destabilized and that democracy is imperiled with the rising antagonism between different social fractions and their political parties. In order to contribute to Turkey's democratic durability, the EU needs to affirm its commitment to Turkey's membership and reach out to all

the stakeholders in Turkish politics. Today support among Turks for membership of the EU is as low as 17 percent; this compared to 2004 when a record high of 78 percent of the Turkish population were in favor of the membership and reform process. Instead, recent developments run the risk of seeing an increasingly inward-looking Turkey occupied with domestic political struggles, which will only lead to further deepening the gulf between Turkey and the EU.

*Ozan Serdaroglu is Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm.*

*The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Security and Development Policy or its sponsors.*

© The Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2013. This Policy Brief can be freely reproduced provided that ISDP is informed.

### ABOUT ISDP

*The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the interrelationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.*

WEBSITE: [WWW.ISDP.EU](http://WWW.ISDP.EU)