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Back to the future

On the threshold of the new 'Turkish century', the main success of the government may be a return to its roots

One of the secrets of the political longevity enjoyed by Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) (in government since 2002) and its long-time leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is their openness to change. Despite its conservative ideology, the AKP has managed to show the electorate that it is willing to revise its policies. In contrast to his main rival — the leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP) Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu — Erdoğan proved capable of learning from his mistakes, though he would rarely admit this in public.

However, the 2023 elections showed that the population was running out of patience (the opposition won a record 47 per cent of the vote), and they may reach the end of their tether sooner than expected. All the more so since there is not much time for the AKP to rectify past mistakes — local elections are slated for spring 2024, and the Justice and Development Party is intending to regain control over several major cities. Since 2019, the country's biggest cities, with their impressive municipal budgets — İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Adana, Mersin and Antalya — have all been in the opposition's hands. The inhabitants of Turkey's largest cities have been hit hard by the repercussions of the resettlement of millions of Syrian refugees, the country's economic crisis and what has been dubbed 'Erdoğanomics'—the president's 'unorthodox' financial policy of keeping interest rates artificially low.

It is these very problems, along with high inflation, the record devaluation of the Turkish lira and demands for the country to return to the path of democratic development that determined the results of the presidential elections. And although Erdoğan managed to beat his opponent, the task ahead is not an easy one. The ruling party still has to repeat this success at the local elections, and in İstanbul, for instance, the AKP candidate will be up against the far more popular Ekrem İmamoğlu. The return home of millions of refugees, attraction of Western investment, the reconstruction of the country after the devastating earthquake and economic shocks, and lastly, improving the efficiency of the public administration are all high-priority tasks which the Turkish

voters expect to be addressed, irrespective of their ideological views or political preferences.

An attempt to liberalise domestic politics

The composition of the new cabinet shows that this is something the presidential administration is all too well aware of: in the recent reshuffle, only two previous cabinet ministers kept their positions. In the new cabinet, there was no place for heavyweights and long-time Erdoğan allies such as Minister of National Defence Hulusi Akar and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, nor for anti-Western 'hawks' like Süleyman Soylu — the now ex-minister of the interior who frequently made the lives of his colleagues in the department of foreign affairs difficult with his hard-line nationalist rhetoric and violent attacks against Western allies.

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At the same time, several iconic figures from the early days of the Justice and Development Party returned to the cabinet. To strengthen the economic bloc, Cevdet Yılmaz was appointed to the post of vice president. Yılmaz had been minister of development in the governments of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu between 2011 and 2016. Mehmet Şimşek, rightly deemed one of the main architects of the Turkish 'economic miracle', received the Ministry of Treasury and Finance again, having already occupied the post from 2009 to 2015. The fact that Yılmaz is an ethnic Zaza and Şimşek has Kurdish roots is also reminiscent of the attempts to liberalise domestic politics in the early years of Erdoğan's premiership.

This time round, rather than loyal 'apparatchiks', the preference is clearly towards young professionals (13 of the 18 ministers were independents) capable of making quick, effective and unconventional decisions. Despite the frequent criticism of the Western system, the current ministers include graduates from Princeton, Stanford and Harvard, as well as some of the top universities in Europe. If the Turkish media is to be believed, at least three of the top names in the new cabinet have dual citizenship — American, British and Belgian.

This does not necessarily mean 'a turn to the West' for Turkey, but it

does stop the country from turning further East. The main 'anchors' preventing Ankara from drifting dangerously towards its Eurasian partners are Turkish business interests (the EU is still Turkey's biggest trade partner) and national security concerns, 'cementing' the country's NATO membership.

Resuming a dialogue with Western countries

The return to 'rational' economic policy, recently announced by the new minister of finance, has given experts grounds for cautious optimism. There are high hopes for Şimşek's team of world-class financiers, whose names have been referred to as 'music to the ears of Western interests'. Above all, we are talking about Central Bank Governor Hafize Gaye Erkan, who previously held executive positions with Tiffany & Co and the US First Republic Bank.

The first decision she made in her new post was to implement the long-overdue increase in interest rates — from 8.5 to 15 per cent. According to financial analysts, to stabilise the exchange rate of the lira and reduce inflation, the interest rate would have to be raised to at least 25–30 per cent. However, this 'independent' central bank decision, which runs counter to the president's financial theory, has already had a positive impact on the market.

At the same time, a return to a more 'orthodox' economic policy might not be enough to secure long-term international investment. To restore the confidence of Western investors, far more fundamental change is required: strengthening the rule of law, minimising political risks, improving stability, government accountability and transparency are only possible with an independent judiciary and strong state institutions. All this, in turn, requires limiting presidential powers, which is practically impossible in the current 'super-presidential' system.

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A no less important condition is the resumption of political dialogue with Western partners. It was this, in particular, which also prompted staff changes in the two key Turkish foreign policy and security structures — the foreign ministry and the national intelligence agency (MIT). An unconventional reshuffle resulted in the appointment of one of the country's leading diplomats Hakan Fidan. This former intelligence officer with 13 years of experience

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working 'behind the scenes' has participated in secret talks on the most sensitive issues, from the Iranian nuclear deal and meetings with Kurdish terrorists to talks on Syria and playing a mediating role in Russia's war on Ukraine. The appointment speaks volumes about the priorities of the new ministry. At the same time, the transfer of MIT into the hands of Erdoğan's foreign policy adviser — İbrahim Kalın — ensures the continuation of 'back-track diplomacy'.

Fidan's Western counterparts value his moderation, pragmatism and rational decision-making. His increased contact with American and European peers is the first positive move towards the deployment of additional Turkish troops to participate in KFOR operations in Kosovo and is aimed at emphasising Turkey's willingness to play a constructive role in NATO. For its part, Ankara expects its NATO allies to take reciprocal steps — especially unfreezing the delivery of aircraft and modernisation kits for its F-16 fleet.

Staffing decisions in the Turkish Defence Industry Agency (SSB) should also push Turkey's partners to make the 'right' move. Long-standing president of the agency, İsmail Demir, who is now facing American sanctions for his role in Turkey's purchase of Russian S-400 air defence systems, is succeeded by Haluk Görgün, former director of the ASELSAN company, which holds a strong position on the global arms market. In March of this year, Görgün announced that 'Turkey no longer needs Russian-made S-300 and S-400', since the country is capable of producing its own air defense system.

Although this is in fact still a long way off, there is a shortcut. In international relations, much like in economics, often the most rational way of solving a problem is to abandon the policies that created it in the first place.



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