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KEY ISSUE: A short 75-word statement of your conclusions about the issue or news event on which the article focuses.

BACKGROUND: ca. 500 words of analysis about what has led up to the event or issue and why this issue is critical to the region. Include background information about the views and experiences of the local population.

IMPLICATIONS: 500 to 700 words of analysis of the ramifications of this event or issue, including where applicable, implications for the local people's future.

CONCLUSIONS: ca. 200 words that strongly state your conclusions about the impact of the event or issue.

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TURKEY ON THE BRINK OF ECONOMIC CRISIS

M. K. Kaya

The effects of the global economic crisis are increasingly making themselves felt in Turkey as well. After having initially taken the position that Turkey would somehow remain shielded from the global unrest, the AKP government has gradually been forced to acknowledge the vulnerability of the Turkish economy. However, with continued political instability and with the upcoming local elections, the AKP government is having severe difficulties in mustering the required ability to manage the unfolding economic crisis.

BACKGROUND: Up until now, the main success story of the AKP government had seemingly been its economic performance. The government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan had managed to decrease the inflation rate to a single digit level, although there are question marks regarding the way the official inflation rate is calculated. Yet, an increased GDP, a powerful currency, and annual growth rates around 6 percent seemed to speak of a

healthy economy in steady progress. For a while, fundamental economic weaknesses escaped wider attention: The US\$50 billion current account deficit, the structural problems inherent to the social security system, and not least the debts that the municipal administrations had accumulated were however of a kind to undermine the perception of an economy in good health.

The abundance of liquidity, the privatization revenues and the high interest rates that served to attract foreign capital made it possible to compensate the current account deficit. In addition, the fact that the banking sector of Turkey remains strictly controlled since the 2001 economic meltdown in the



country seemed to supply Turkey with a secure protection against a global crisis which had originated in the financial sectors. And the strict adherence by the AKP government to the IMF programs since it came to power in 2002 contributed to it being positively judged by the global markets.

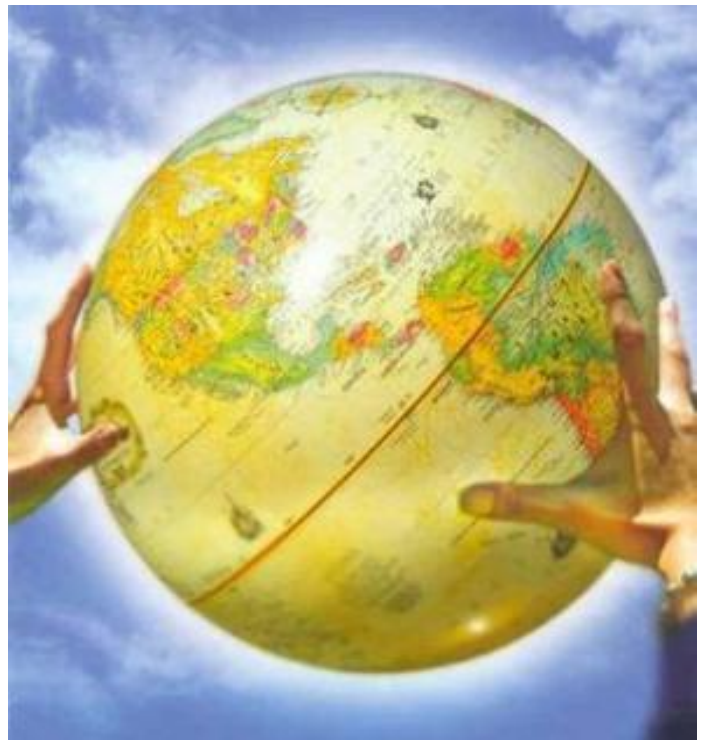
The AKP government was rewarded for its economic performance in the general elections of 2007. Yet, Turkey was headed towards economically troubled waters well before the global economic crisis hit the country. The structural problems in the economy were bound to surface sooner or later. The political crisis over the issue of secularism, which was triggered by the presidential election in 2007 and which lasted until the ruling of the Constitutional court not to close down the AKP in August 2008, has further destabilized Turkey. It was a well known fact that the political instability had already contributed to making Turkey less attractive for foreign investments before the outbreak of the global crisis.

IMPLICATIONS: The global crisis first began to affect Turkey when foreign investors started to withdraw from the Turkish market. Consequently, the U.S. Dollar - which had been fluctuating around 1.2 Turkish Lira for a long time - went up to 1.7 YTL. This number, which amounted to a substantial *de facto* devaluation, was the first signal that Turkey was being seriously dragged into the crisis.

After having initially assured that the Turkish economy was in good shape, representatives of the government and of the bureaucracy in charge of the economy were forced to admit that serious counter-measures against the crisis were indeed called upon. Using foreign sources to a great extent, the Turkish banking sector also started to adjust, diminishing its activities as a consequence of the crisis. However, there is still no

comprehensive policy laid out by the government as a response to the quickly unfolding crisis.

Meanwhile, the economic situation has also been aggravated by the unexpectedly early spill-over of the financial crisis into the real economy. During November, the Turkish economy shrank by 18 percent compared to November of the year before. And the downward spiral is expected to continue well into the next year as a result of the threatening recession in the countries of Europe - Turkey's principal export markets. Already, many companies working with short-term commercial loans have started to lay off workers and delay salaries.



There are two major explanations to the tardiness of the AKP government in planning for and executing significant counter-measures to the crisis. Initially, there was, as mentioned above, overconfidence in the health of the banking sector as a result of the strict controls in place after the 2001 economic crisis. That sustained the illusion that Turkey would succeed in passively riding out

the storm. The second and increasingly more important factor has to do with political problems and administrative inefficiencies within the government. This in turn inevitably affects the workings of the bureaucracy responsible for the management of the economy.

One problem is related to the leadership of Prime Minister Erdogan. Erdogan seems to assume that replacing incapable bureaucrats and cabinet ministers would be perceived as a sign of weakness. However, a number of cabinet ministers, many of whom have held their seats for six years, are in a state of exhaustion. To that, it should be added there is a general perception that the two new ministers responsible for the economy – Nazim Ekren and Mehmet Simsek – are not quite up to the task at their hands. Furthermore, the fact that Prime Minister Erdogan has a tendency to get involved in harsh conflict, rather than to seek calm compromises, renders the handling of the economic crisis even more difficult. As Erdogan has a *modus operandi* of rejecting the views of economic circles and of civil society organizations which happen to run counter to the government line, this inhibits the evolution of an atmosphere of constructive dialogue about the direction of the economy.

The upcoming, 29 March 2009 local elections will also exact their toll on the economy. Desiring a clear victory, Erdogan has opted for an increase in government spending. Obviously, this choice, although it may come to be electorally rewarded just as it was in the general elections of 2007, runs entirely contrary to the demands of the economy.

Finally, the issue of secularism remains a factor of insecurity. A re-ignition of the conflict cannot be

ruled out. It is still unclear what lessons the leadership of the AKP has drawn from the rulings of the Constitutional court, whether these ultimately will serve to restrain the Islamic conservatives from mounting further challenges to the secular order, or if the AKP by contrast will opt for a renewed confrontation, this time taking direct aim at the Constitutional court.

CONCLUSIONS: Turkey has experienced a number of severe economic crises since the middle of the 1990s – in 1994, 1997 and 2001. Turkey is thus battle-hardened. Although the AKP government to a large extent has replaced experienced bureaucratic cadres with loyalists, the bureaucracy remains institutionally capable of generating necessary counter-measures. After a while, the government will have to apply the measured packages prepared by the bureaucracy. An agreement with the IMF can eventually also be expected to be reached after such a process of bureaucratic evaluation.

However, despite all measures it is certain that, like much of the rest of the world, the Turkish economy is headed for recession. A 15 percent decrease in exports and a 20 percent decrease in imports are predicted. The current lay-offs in the workforce and the increase in businesses going bankrupt are further signals of it. Yet, the main element which will deepen the effect of the crisis in Turkey is the country's political development. So far, the AKP government has failed to rise to the occasion. Prime Minister Erdogan has not exercised the kind of political leadership that would help reassure the public.

THE CHP'S OVERTURE TO CONSERVATISM PORTENDS A RE-ARRANGED POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Halil Magnus Karaveli

The opposition Republican people's party, CHP, long perceived as dogmatically secularist, is now intent on broadening its base and its message. CHP leader Deniz Baykal has made a bold move by enlisting women wearing the headscarf and even the black chador as party members. The overture to veiled women could at best pave the way for a new realignment that contributes to the reconciliation of secularism and religious traditionalism. But it also raises new questions about the future of secularism in Turkey.

BACKGROUND: The scene was evocative: Deniz Baykal, leader of the staunchly pro-secular Republican people's party, CHP, personally fixing the pin of his party on women in black chador. The event recently took place at a CHP meeting in one of Istanbul's working class suburbs, and it has dominated the political discussion in Turkey since mid-November. Baykal's move, apparently prepared by the party's local Istanbul branch, has caused uproar among die-hard secularists within the CHP itself, who assail it as an unacceptable concession to religious conservatism.

Party leader Deniz Baykal is being accused of catering to Islamist sentiments in the short-sighted expectation of attracting new voters in the upcoming local elections in March 2009, and of being no better than the AKP leader and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip

Erdogan in exploiting the Islamic headscarf to political ends. The secularist opponents of Baykal object to the overture not only on account of the party's long cherished principles, but equally call the presumed tactical considerations behind it into question. They ask how the new party line will be reconciled with the firm opposition that the CHP has mounted against the introduction of the Islamic headscarf in the universities and in public offices. And they question the assumption that it will provide CHP with new voters; on the contrary, it may lead to the party losing ground among its core supporters, they assert.



Deniz Baykal rejects the secularist criticism. "Are we supposed to tell people who knock on the door of our party, "No, your dresses are not appropriate"? Or are we supposed to tell them to change their clothes first? Would that be reasonable? Are we

expected to return to the mentality that reigned during the one-party era (1923 to 1950), when gendarmes prevented peasants from entering the central parts of Ankara because they wore their traditional clothes?”

Baykal denies that the overture to veiled women amounts to making use of the headscarf and the veil as political symbols. “On the contrary, we contribute to the de-politicization of the veil. From now on, you will not be able to assume that every woman you see on the street who wears the headscarf is an AKP supporter. It will be evident that women in headscarf may as well be supporters of the CHP. Our move thus signifies that the political symbolism attached to the headscarf has been effectively shattered.”

To those of his critics who challenge the assumption that the move will pay off electorally, who maintain that CHP will never attract religiously conservative voters whatever it does, Baykal retorts that there are already women in headscarf, even in chador, among the party’s voters. “As it happens, there are uncovered as well as covered women among those who are opposed to Atatürk and secularism”, Baykal notes. Nor does the CHP leader see any contradiction in welcoming veiled women as party members while simultaneously upholding the principle that religious symbols must be kept out of public offices: “Our citizens can dress as they choose. But we will not admit to the veiling of the state. That is an altogether different question.”

IMPLICATIONS: The CHP’s overture to the veil and the chador augurs a new era in the politics of Turkey. The political cards are being rearranged as political parties – not only the CHP – reinvent themselves. Significantly, the line separating secularists and religious conservatives is becoming increasingly blurred. In fact, what the CHP is doing amounts to copying the AKP’s long-standing strategy. The success of the Islamic conservative AKP is in large part due to the

party’s ability to harness a range of different, indeed contradictory ideological causes. The AKP has not only been the party of religious conservatism, but it has also successfully appropriated the political banners of EU membership for Turkey, freedom, economic liberalism and social equality. However, lately the AKP has come to sound more nationalistic than anything else. ([See 21 Nov. issue of the Turkey Analyst](#))

Meanwhile, the CHP had until recently restricted itself exclusively to the cause of secularism in its rhetoric, and had consequently been unable to reach out to a wider electorate in the way the AKP has succeeded in doing. The welcoming of women in veil and in black chador is proof that the leadership of CHP has realized that the party must adjust to the reality that religious conservatism is the defining paradigm of Turkish society today, and that the message of the party will have to be broadened.

Yet, while such repositioning makes perfect sense in tactical, electoral terms, the reinvention of the CHP is not without risks either. The Republican people’s party will have to strike a balance between principles and tactics; if the core identity of the party is perceived to be diluted, it is bound to become difficult for the CHP to preserve the loyalty of some of its more traditional supporters.

However, it should also be noted that the perception of CHP – indeed shared both by its die-hard Kemalist core and its liberal and conservative detractors – as a staunchly secularist party prone to hectoring (or educating, in the eyes of the Kemalists) the conservative masses is partly un-historical. While there is a wide-spread perception of the CHP as an elitist party supposedly insensitive to popular, religious values, the appeasement of religious sentiments is not new to the party. In a landmark party congress in the 1930s, when the CHP ruled as single party, the CHP tellingly desisted from calling for a ban on

the veil and the chador, settling for a pronouncement that women should be encouraged to free themselves from veiling. The first theological faculty, as well as the first imam school, was inaugurated under CHP rule in the 1940s. Compulsory religious education at elementary school level was introduced under a government led by the CHP in the 1970s.

Indeed, it is to that later era that those who make overtures to popular conservatism today refer – an era when the CHP, under the leadership of Bülent Ecevit, developed an explicitly populist posture and significantly scored its best electoral result ever. Deniz Baykal employs the term “Anatolian left” to denote the ideology that is to inspire CHP, by which he means a left that is anchored in the values of the Anatolian heartland of Turkey. That obviously has a democratic sound to it, yet the rights of women do not figure pre-eminently among those Anatolian heartland values. That inevitably presents a dilemma for a party that aspires to be progressive as well as popular.

Although it may admittedly be a difficult exercise to reconcile both aims, ideally the CHP would convey the message that the party excludes no part of the population in its progressive endeavor. In that perspective, the overture to veiled women was not particularly well handled. As it were, the message that came across – largely as a result of the setup at the ceremony where only women in veil and in black chador were welcomed to the party – was that the “new” CHP stands for “freedom for the chador”, and not necessarily for all women’s rights. Liberal commentator Haluk Sahin in *Radikal* bemoaned that the opportunity to send the signal that CHP cares for women’s rights in general was missed: “The message ought to have been that we will fight against any infringement of those rights, whether it is about honor killings, the plight of HIV-positive prostitutes or about being able to wear the headscarf”.

CONCLUSIONS: On the one hand, the CHP’s most recent overture to religious conservatism carries the potential to reduce the polarization of Turkish society between secularists and religious conservatives, and may contribute to the emergence of the CHP as a real alternative to the AKP. The fact that a party that has come to be associated – rightly or wrongly – with dogmatic secularism reaches out across the great divide of Turkish society, could eventually ease the way for a democratic reconciliation of secularism and religious conservatism. And apparently, the CHP is making some headway among the conservatives. Yet, the CHP’s move could just as easily be interpreted as a sacrifice of principles, as a sign that the party has come to care less about the protection and enhancement of secularism than of being able to conquer power.

It is one thing to broaden the message of the party and being inclusive, and another thing to seem to care less about core principles. Kemal Kiliçdaroglu, deputy chairman of the CHP’s parliamentary group, recently told this author in November that “henceforth we are going to address ourselves to the mosque congregations”. “Secularism”, declared Kiliçdaroglu, “is something that resounds among the more sophisticated parts of the population”.

Obviously, the pro-secular CHP cannot afford to neglect to take into consideration the tactical implications of the popular implantation of religious conservatism. There is a fine line between seeking to be inclusive, by reaching out to veiled women, and conveying the impression of having no trouble with the kind of female submission that the veil and the chador nevertheless stand for. Ultimately, the opening of CHP to the veil and the black chador, and the acknowledgement of the party leadership that secularism is a dead end politically, raises the question if secularism would indeed fare better if the “secularists” chose to speak less about it.

THE FORTNIGHT IN REVIEW

SECTION I: WHAT THE COLUMNISTS SAY

The opening of the secularist Republican people's party, CHP, to veiled women, welcoming a number of them as party members, has generated a heated debate within the ranks of the CHP, and has been widely commented by the columnists. The CHP's change of tactics has generally been hailed by mainstream commentators as a welcome departure from the party's traditional line, while staunchly secularist, otherwise pro-CHP columnists tend to be disapproving.

ATABEK: WHAT GOOD WOULD A VEILED CHP DO?

Erdal Atabek, writing in the pro-secular Cumhuriyet, disapproves strongly of CHP's opening to veiled women. I don't believe that such a move will attract more voters to the CHP – on the contrary. It is a step that risks alienating those voters who are traditionally loyal to the Republican people's party. The CHP risks losing the votes of its core supporters. And those voters who have voted for AKP will hardly move over to the CHP. In fact, the veiling of the CHP strengthens the hand of the AKP. The narrow strategy of party leader Deniz Baykal sacrifices the principles of CHP. Can the mentality for which the headscarf and the veil stand for be called secular? Can that mentality accept gender equality? Can the ideology of which the headscarf and the veil are the symbols make peace with a societal order that is not controlled by religion? What can a veiled CHP be but a lackluster copy of the AKP? It will have no right even to ask for our vote.

KORU: A FALSE OPENING

Fehmi Koru, writing in the pro-AKP Yeni Safak, notes that the move by Deniz Baykal has generated extremely sharp opposition in the ranks of the CHP. Let alone admitting veiled women as party members, if it were possible these types would like to disenfranchise veiled women. A CHP which has got stuck with 20 percent support obviously needs to embrace the 70 percent of society; but while doing that the leadership of the party must be prepared to part ways with the kind of fanatical, prejudiced types that exist in the base of every political party. It has to take symbolically important steps such as the AKP did when it embraced the EU perspective and when it made its peace with the principle of secularism. A corresponding step by a CHP which has welcomed veiled women as party members would be if the party stopped opposing the admission of women wearing the headscarf to the universities. Unfortunately, the opening has revealed that the CHP leadership is anything but ready for such a move.

SAHIN: THE CARDS ARE ABOUT TO BE RE-ARRANGED

Liberal commentator Haluk Sahin in Radikal sees the change under way in the CHP as part of a greater re-arrangement of the political cards. As Deniz Baykal welcomes veiled women to CHP, the AKP of Recep Tayyip Erdogan is increasingly appealing to Turkish nationalism and Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the rightist nationalist MHP, is making overtures to the heterodox Alevi minority with which the supporters of MHP have clashed violently in the past. Is all this just a question of tactical repositioning as the local elections approaches? Or does it augur a deeper ideological change in those three parties? It is anyhow apparent that Deniz Baykal has realized that the CHP will not make headway in a Turkey which has become more conservative unless it broadens its base.

BILA: A SENSIBLE OPENING

Fikret Bila, a pro-secular commentator in Milliyet supports Deniz Baykal's move. In fact, it is not the radical step that it has been made to look like. The politicization of the question of the headscarf has created the erroneous impression that Turkish society is divided between those wearing the headscarf and those who do not wear it. There is now a perception of the AKP as the party of women in headscarf and of the CHP as the party of uncovered women. In reality, both the AKP and the CHP, being mass-parties, have supporters from of all walks of society. By definition, such parties cannot have "uniform" supporters. There are women who do not cover their heads in the AKP, as there are covered women in the CHP. As Prime

Minister Erdogan welcomes non-covered women to the AKP and CHP leader Baykal welcomes covered women to his party, they both make a contribution to the easing of tensions in society. They show how prejudiced it is to assume that the covered woman on the street is an AKP supporter and the uncovered woman must be a CHP supporter. Baykal's move should be viewed as a step that makes it potentially easier to overcome societal division.

YALÇIN: CHP WAS NEVER AGAINST THE VEIL

Soner Yalçın in Hürriyet sets the ongoing discussion about the CHP and the veil in a historical context. Why should the CHP have any complex about the veil? It was under the rule of CHP that religious education was made compulsory at elementary school level. It was a CHP government that opened the first imam school. It was under CHP rule that the first theological faculty was opened, notes Yalçın. And he takes his readers on a historical tour, back to the heated discussions about the veil and the covering of women that took place at the fourth CHP party congress, in 1935. The proposition that the veil and the chador should be banned by law was rejected by the party leadership, and ultimately by the majority of the congress. Despite the fact that Turkey had one-party rule, the ruling CHP desisted from banning the veil and the chador. The CHP did not go further than decide to encourage women to remove the veil. The tale told by the Islamists, that the gendarmes of the one-party state used to tear off the veils of women, is a myth.

SECTION II: DOMESTIC POLITICS

TURKEY SHOULD FOCUS ON THE KURDISH ISSUE AND NOT FOLLOW THE U.S PLAN

A former high level CIA administrator, Graham Fuller, stated that the New Middle East Project has turned into a disaster and that Turkey would do best in not taking part in this American plan. Fuller continued by saying that Turkey should not follow Washington's policy and that Turkey's and America's interests in the Middle East are not compatible. When Fuller spoke to the BBC's Turkish Service he stressed that if Turkey wants to become a regional strength the Kurdish issue must be solved, by saying "Turkey is currently being held hostage by the Kurdish issue. An unhappy Diyarbakır, will bring Turkey into a powerless situation in the region and will make them less defensive against enemy tendencies wanting to manipulate the Kurdish issue. This will be a factor that will tie Turkey's hands to their relations with Iraq, Iran and Syria. Until Turkey solves the problem, trusting relations with these countries will not be established. However, a happy Diyarbakır, would be a very significant tool for Turkey to use in foreign politics. If Turkey can solve the Kurdish issue then they will be able to be stronger in the region, and then Iran, Iraq and Syria would fear their own Kurdish population. In that case, Turkey would hold the speaking rights regarding the Kurdish issue." He continued by saying, "They (Turkey) are beginning to realize that it is necessary to have dialogue with Iraqi Kurds. Turkey has begun to display that they comprehend the issue. If Turkey can increase their dialogue with Iraqi Kurds, the PKK issue could be solved. Including the Turkish military, it appears the recognition that in

addition to military pressure, the PKK needs to be pressured politically, has been understood." Fuller also touched upon to effects that the relations between Turkey and US will develop when Obama takes on the presidency and he claimed that the African American president may be able to establish stronger relations with Ankara. Stating that the New Middle East project put forth by the Bush administration had turned into a disaster, he said "I am not of the opinion that Turkey needs to take on a role included in the American plan". (*Sabah, November 25*)

TURKISH COMPANIES ARE HIGH RANKED ON THE INTERNATIONAL MARKET

Twenty Turkish companies were listed on Deloitte's Fast 500 list, that lists the 500 fastest growing companies in technology in Europe, Middle East and African regions. The list was announced at a ceremony held at London's historical Cricket Club. Some of the companies which made the list were Phonoclick 2003-2007, which came in 37th with a 3,031 percentage of growth Ce Bilgi Islem Communication and Technology Services made 40th with a 2,890 percentage of growth, in 79th position was the Bilgi Sistemleri Sanayi ve Dis Ticaret Limited Company with annual rate of growth at 1,942 percent. Deloitte concluded that Turkish technology companies are consistently growing in the European, Middle East and African regions and the leader of Turkey's Technology, Media and Telecommunication, Sait Gözüm were pleased and stated, "Last year, nineteen companies placed on the list, this year this number has gone up to twenty. Our companies are continuing to display a strong and stable performance. They are

starting to draw more attention with their performance. Technology companies with their high returns and dynamism will provide a serious contribution to overcoming the economic slowdown which has taken over the world." The manager of Phonoclick were very pleased to have made the list and stressed the fact that they are an Istanbul-based company and that they over the past five years have experienced 3,031 percentage growth and they will continue to strive for more success. (*Sabah, November 26*)

PROTESTERS AND POLICE CLASH IN TURKISH UNION DEMONSTRATIONS

A major rally organized by the unions to protest job cuts and government's economy policies were taking place in Ankara on Saturday. Tens of thousands of peoples attended the rally and the police had to use pepper gas to be able to disperse the protesters. The workers were carrying banners, saying "We would not pay the price of the crisis" and at the same time the unions officially named the rally as "Labor, Peace and Democracy". Leftist political parties as well as numerous NGOs extended their support to the demonstration and the unions. (*Hürriyet, November 28*)

FOREIGN OBSERVERS AND MEDIA ARE BECOMING MORE CRITICAL OF THE TURKISH PRIME MINISTER TAYYIP ERDOGAN

A harsh criticism from the world leading media organizations have been pointed at Erdogan, after praising him since he took the power in 2002. International media such as Newsweek, the Economist and Reuters have been publishing articles in which they criticize Erdogan for losing his reform enthusiasm. In this week's issue the Economist wrote, "Mr. Erdogan appears increasingly autocratic and out of touch. And because he lacks any credible political opponents, either within or beyond the AKP,

this is making Turkey look stagnant and adrift—and further away from EU membership than ever". Strong criticism against the Turkish government and Erdogan for slowing down reforms, losing tolerance to criticism, increased reports of torture, launching a war against media and underestimating the global credit crisis have already been stated. Reuters published an article the same day that the Economist published their critic on Erdogan, where they wrote "Turkey's ruling AKP is rapidly losing the support of liberals and business leaders who once saw it as an engine of reform, confronting it with serious challenges three months before municipal elections." In early November Newsweek wrote that there is a danger that Erdogan might follow a similar path as the Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in his fight with the owner of Turkey's largest media group, Aydin Dogan. Foreign media and analyst describe this as shift, where Erdogan went from a reformist to "autocrat" and Reuters explains this by claiming that the AKP aligned itself with the powerful military on its approach for a solution on the Kurdish issue, and that the party is adopting an increasingly nationalist tone. They added "Liberals believe the AKP, which survived a legal case to close it down for Islamist activities, and the army, have struck a deal that allows the party to remain in power in exchange for dropping EU reforms to curb the generals' power". The Economist took a step further in there criticism and claimed that Erdogan struck a deal with the Turkish Chief of staff Ilker Basbug, which he promised to freeze reforms that dilute the army's power and in exchange his party will not be attacked in court again. The article added, "When Mr. Erdogan won power a second time, with an even bigger share of the vote, in July 2007, he promised to reach out to all Turks "including those of you who didn't vote for me." He seems now to be alienating such voters. And as corruption also

starts to infect the AKP's ranks, it is beginning to resemble many of the tired old parties that it buried at the polls". (*Hürriyet*, November 30)

ALEVIS, KURDS AND HEADSCARVED WOMEN ATTRACTS ATTENTION IN THE CAMPAIGNS FOR THE UPCOMING ELECTION

Alevis, Kurds and headscarved women have for a long time been neglected groups, but the change of attitude towards them started with the main opposition Republican People's party (CHP) Deniz Baykal with his unexpected softening in the question last month. Since the local election will be held in a near future there are speculations that the political parties have focused their attention on these groups prior to the elections in a move to garner their votes. However Alevis, Kurds and headscarved women oppose these speculations. Hilal Kaplan who kicked off a struggle for the liberty of all segments of society with a statement "We are not free yet", said that CHP's move to gain support of conservative voters by changing their stance on the headscarf question was nothing but a mere illusion "It is apolitical maneuver prior to local elections. The main opposition party is acting in an insincere manner". Others welcomed his move by saying that they would be pleased to see the CHP contribute to the solution of the country's problems. Another group that attracted attention during the last month is the Alevis, which is a group that has complained on various occasions about being subjected to discrimination and deprived of their cultural and religious rights. The ruling AKP has

shaped a new initiative to produce solutions to problems faced by Alevi citizens. The new initiative will pay the Alevi religious leaders a monthly salary and the electricity and water bills of cemevis (Alevi places of worship) will be paid by the state. The opposition party MHP have also done similar approach to solve the Alevi issue, however the parties action plan seem not to have much impact on Alevis, who tired of given promises by political parties which are then forgotten after the elections. Turkey's Kurdish question have existed through Turkey's whole history and the ruling party made a real effort to complete the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP), there also started up a new project to get the first Kurdish TV channel, signaling the end of an era in which the use of Kurdish was prohibited following the 1980 military coup. All these determined steps to make sure that Kurdish citizens can enjoy their cultural rights and raise their trust for the government and the state. (*Zaman*, November 30)

THE SUPREME MILITARY BOARD EXPELS 24 PERSONNEL

The Supreme Military Board expels 24 personnel and five of them for fundamentalist activities. It was stated at the Supreme Military Board Meeting that 24 personnel were to be expelled, which were decided by a majority of voting. This decision was later approved by the President Abdullah Gül. This decision was due to security risks, drug use and immoral conduct which jeopardizes the Turkish Armed Forces. (*Sabah*, December 3)

SECTION III: FOREIGN RELATIONS

A REUNITED CYPRUS COULD BE CONCLUDED AS SOON AS 2009 IF TURKEY ADOPTS "A MORE CONSTRUCTIVE ATTITUDE"

Greek Cypriots have signed gas and oil exploration deals with Egypt and Lebanon, despite Ankara's protests, saying that the deal will damage the rights of the Turkish Cypriots. The Greek Cypriot leader Demetrios Christofias said that negotiations are still in "the first phase" and resolving the decades-old problem next year would be "a tight time schedule". Christofias said on a news conference during his visit to Athens that, "It's not in our interest to waste time. We want a solution to reunite the people, the region, as soon as possible," and added that "If Turkey adopts a good attitude, if it shows understanding, then yes, we could have a solution in 2009." Christofias also urged the Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat to show more independence from Ankara. Both sides agreed to a settlement based on a federation, but there are disagreements of how it would work and the degree of authority each side would have. "We will not agree to Turkey's EU membership while Turkey continues to violate the sovereignty of an EU member," Christofias said and added that the oil survey would be completed. (*Hürriyet*, November 30)

NEW U.S AMBASSADOR IN ANKARA

A new U.S ambassador arrived in Ankara yesterday. The ambassador, James Jeffrey has served duty in Turkey three times prior and is very pleased to be back in Turkey. When he arrived at the airport he made an announcement about the fact that Turkey and United States have been comrades since 1923 and have been NATO allies for 58 years, he also stated that "What is significant for Ankara and Washington is that we have a special alliance." Jeffrey will begin his work as an ambassador as soon as he provides President Abdullah Gül with a letter of confidentiality. (*Sabah*, December 1)

THE FIRST CAUCASUS PLATFORM MEETING WILL BE HELD IN HELSINKI

Ankara have for months tried to bring Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Russia together to discuss Turkey's proposal to establish a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform and find a resolution to the conflicts in Caucasus. After months of efforts the five countries agreed to meet in Helsinki later this week. The Turkish foreign minister told reports on Sunday before his departure to Baku, Azerbaijan that the function of the Caucasus platform is one of the topics on the agenda for his talks with his Azerbaijani counterpart. The 16th Ministerial Council of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) will be held on Thursday and Friday in Helsinki. Babacan will attend this meeting and he said that the OSCE's Ministerial Council plays an important role in the current state of affairs in the region. The first meeting of the Caucasus platform will be held on the sidelines of the OSCE meeting in Helsinki which will consist technical negotiations concerning the platform's goals, principles and mechanisms. There were a lot of skeptical minds about the proposal from the beginning, both from the U.S administration but after Turkish diplomats explained their aims and after a long telephone conversation between the Turkish FM and the US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice the US administration changed its stance. The most skeptical mind came from Georgia that stated that they would not sit at the same table with Russia, Babacan however told reporters that his Georgian counterpart Ekaterine Tkeshelashvili told him that Georgia would be part of the proposed Caucasus platform. (*Zaman*, December 2)

DISPUTE BETWEEN TURKEY AND THE GREEK CYPRIOT ADMINISTRATION WILL HARM THE NEGOTIATIONS OF A UNITED CYPRIOS.

The Greek Cypriot leader Demetrios Christofias claimed in a letter to U.N that the Reunification talks on Cyprus will be harmed because of the

dispute between Turkey and Greek part of Cypriots over oil exploration in the Mediterranean. Turkey has been accused of harassing research vessels on four occasions since Nov. 13 in areas which are earmarked for future hydrocarbon exploration. Christofias wrote in the letter "The continuation of these incidents, I am sad to observe, unavoidably impacts negatively on our efforts to reach a negotiated solution to the Cyprus problem". The Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat and his Greek counterpart opened negotiation talks in September but what's complicating the issue is the recent tension between the Greek Cypriot administration and Turkey over oil exploration rights. (*Hürriyet*, December 3)

GÜL IS HOSTING TALKS BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

On Friday there will be a trilateral meeting between leaders from Turkey, Afghanistan and Pakistan in Istanbul. The Turkish president Abdullah Gül, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistani President Asif Zardari will start their second round of talks on Friday in a move to bring the two neighbors closer. The first summit was held in April last year who enabled the two leaders to discuss stepping up joint efforts for regional security. Besides the bilateral relation the meeting on Friday will aim to discuss trilateral economic cooperation between the countries. There will also be an opportunity for Zerdari and Karzai to hold separate talks with Gül and the Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan to discuss the bilateral economic and security cooperation. Turkey supports the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) with 860 soldiers in Afghanistan fighting a rising Taliban insurgency alongside the U.S -led coalition troops and Afghan forces. The U.S President George W. Bush was grateful over Gül's efforts to bring the two Afghan and Pakistani leaders together and to promote cooperation between the two countries. A spokesman from the White House, Gordon Johndroe said, "President Bush thanked President Gul for his commitment to a stable and secure Iraq as well as his ongoing work to promote

cooperation between the leaders of Pakistan and Afghanistan" and he added that Bush and Gül also "discussed the strong relationship between the United States and Turkey". (*Hürriyet*, December 5)

TURKEY'S EXISTENCE DOES NOT DEPEND ON EU ENTRY, SAYS BABACAN

There have been a rising criticism towards the Turkish governments and their lack of ambition to reform from EU and the Turkish foreign minister responded to this by saying that the issue of EU membership was not a matter critical to the existence of Turkey. According to the EU most recent draft report on Turkey its says that it was impossible for the ruling Justice and Development Party AKP to keep its promise to modernize the country, without making further political reforms. When Babacan attended a meeting for foreign ministers of NATO member countries in Brussels he said in an interview that EU membership process is a bumpy road and that the government aims to raise the standard of living for the Turkish people through reforms. Babacan also told the Anatolia news agency that "we do not have any issue of belonging. We are not a country which can only maintain its existence by joining a group or becoming a member [of a group]. Turkey is already a very important country on its own with its history and culture." However the report praised Turkey for its foreign policy, in particular for its rapprochement with Armenia. A separate report by the executive European Commission was released last month, which claimed that Turkey was slowing down their reform process. Ankara responded to this by saying that the EU's status as a global power was at stake if Turkey was left out. Babacan also stressed that the European Commission's report praised Gül for his role in domestic as well as in foreign policy, but it criticized the government led by Erdogan. (*Zaman*, December 5)