

The Turkey Analyst

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Halil M. Karaveli

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*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute
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THE TURKEY ANALYST

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RHETORIC AND REALITY: THE AKP'S LIBERAL VISION

Halil M. Karaveli

In landmark speeches, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Abdullah Gül have celebrated Turkey's multicultural diversity, and declared that the state is to defer to societal pluralism. The liberal discourse departs from the tradition of statism, but its credibility is undermined by the government's illiberal policies. And the "mosaic" of Turkey is far removed from the ideals of tolerance evoked by the rhetoric of Erdoğan and Gül. That represents another, major impediment to the realization of the liberal vision.



BACKGROUND: The preservation of the omnipotence of the state has been the preeminent article of faith of the Turkish political elite ever since the founding of the republic. The strength, indeed survival of the state was believed to require a homogenous nation. The expressions of societal heterogeneity – ethnic, religious and social – have consistently been perceived as threats to the dominance exerted by the state and as such dreaded by the holders of state power. In a landmark speech in parliament that reassembled two weeks ago, President Abdullah Gül introduced

a novel approach at the highest level of the state. Gül made the case for a liberal approach that heralds a departure from traditional statism, at least in rhetoric: “It is contrary to the very nature of a democratic state to cast what is diverse in the same mould and to subject those who are different to treatment as the other”, Gül declared. The president went on to remind his parliamentary audience that “a state that is fearful of differences will not be able to attain the modernity that Atatürk had set as a goal.”

In a subsequent speech delivered at his party's congress, AKP leader and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan further expounded the liberal vision proposed by the AKP and supported by the president: Celebrating cultural diversity and Turkey as a "mosaic", Erdoğan enumerated fourteen names of historical and cultural standing that summarize Turkey's cultural heritage, despite – or indeed because, as Erdoğan underlined – they all appeal to different constituencies. Among those enumerated was the prominent Islamic thinker Said-i Nursi and Nazım Hikmet, the communist writer revered by the Turkish left. Although Said-i Nursi and Nazım Hikmet were worlds apart in every other imaginable respect, they did share the fate of having been persecuted by the Kemalist regime. It was only recently that his citizenship, of which he had been stripped after he was forced to

flee the country, was posthumously restored to Nazım Hikmet. Erdoğan vowed to transcend differences, and to ensure that those who express Turkey's ethnic and cultural diversity are no longer subjected to state oppression.

The embracive discourse adopted by Erdoğan is in line with the AKP's ambition, on evident display since the party was founded, to establish itself as the preeminent force of the centre in Turkish politics. Indeed, the AKP has successfully laid claim to the ideological terrain of not only liberalism but of social democracy as well, reaching beyond its core of Islamic conservatism.

Above all, the liberal discourse serves to impress that the AKP is on the right side of history, in tune with the aspiration to attain modernity. It is a rhetoric that further legitimizes the party's hold on power – concurrently delegitimizing the nationalist opposition – and which gives a boost to AKP's self-confidence. In similar fashion, Kemalism had once enjoyed modernist/progressive legitimacy as the standard bearer of Enlightenment civilization. Yet, it was to be an unfulfilled promise, as the dominant strain of Kemalism soon evolved into a conservative statism more concerned with securing the omnipotence of the state – in the process colluding with religious conservatism – than with pursuing any particular ambitions of enlightenment. There is reason to fear that the liberalism of the AKP can end up as a similarly unfulfilled promise. Although it seems to hold out the prospect of an enlightened evolution of state and society, Islamic conservatism displays semi-authoritarian inclinations as well.

As political scientist Ahmet İnsel recently remarked, the AKP has yet to make up its mind about the state, whether it is going to dismantle the edifice of state authoritarianism bequeathed by the military junta of the 1980s – which would require a comprehensive constitutional reform – or



Nazım Hikmet

if it is going to employ it in the service of its own, particular ideological agenda. In fact, the discrepancy between the liberal rhetoric of the AKP and some of its policies is striking. The promise of respecting diversity is belied by the government's attempt to secure full control of the realm of the media. (See [February 27](#) and [September 14, 2009](#), issues of the Turkey Analyst) Nor does the AKP live up to the standard set by President Abdullah Gül in his speech to parliament, according to which those who are different are not be subjected to treatment as "the other". The evidence that those who seek employment and advancement in the bureaucracy are increasingly required to conform to certain, religious norms – such as participation in the prayers and that spouses wear the headscarf – is on the contrary accumulating, as sociologist Binnaz Toprak among others have showed (See [January 30, 2009 issue of the Turkey Analyst](#)). The portion of the population not conforming to religious conservatism is indeed in the process of being marginalized, of being treated as "the other", rather than embraced.

IMPLICATIONS: The AKP's celebration of cultural multitude and tolerance is insufficiently sustained by political and bureaucratic practices. But it is also poorly rooted in societal realities. According to Fehmi Kuru, an influential commentator with close ties to the leadership of the AKP, "ethnic differences and the existence of an assortment of views in the country are no longer divisive; they have instead become unifying", as a result of the speech of Prime Minister Erdoğan. However, as many other commentators have remarked, Erdoğan has painted a picture of a Turkey that ought to exist, rather than describing the existent Turkey.

Indeed, several recent surveys have suggested that Turkey has to all intents and purposes ceased to be imagined as a shared community. (See [Turkey Analyst, July 3, 2009](#)) Contempt for and intolerance

toward "the other" is widespread. The vast majority of the inhabitants of Turkey refuse to share neighborhood with atheists, with those who hold different beliefs in general. The dogmatic secularists abhor the sight of women in headscarf and don't want them anywhere near their neighborhoods, while conservatives don't tolerate such "permissiveness" as liberal women wearing shorts.

Although Prime Minister Erdoğan honored Pir Sultan Abdal, the medieval poet that is an icon of the Alevi minority in his celebration of Turkey's multicultural mosaic, Pir Sultan Abdal – indeed like every other figure named by Erdoğan – remains contested outside his own constituency, and the Alevi creed is fiercely despised by the Sunni majority. The communist Nazım Hikmet is hated by the nationalist right. To secularists, Said-i Nursi is a symbol of Islamic reaction. Turkey suffers from a lack of common language: as has been noted by political scientist Fuat Keyman, lacking such a language, "we cannot negotiate our differences and establish the norms that are necessary for securing our concord as a commonwealth". And historical experience offers less guidance in the efforts to nurture societal bonds than what is assumed by those – Islamic conservatives and liberal intellectuals – who regard the republican, Kemalist era as an aberration, as a parenthesis of intolerance.

Rejecting the Kemalist attempt to oppress diversity, conservatives and liberals seek inspiration in what is supposed to have been the Ottoman experience of tolerance. Typically, Abdullah Gül has stated that "The Ottoman caliphate had enough confidence that it didn't mind Kurds and Christians. There was no religious hatred in Anatolia. All the violence was a problem of the republican period." Gül's attribution of "all the violence" to the republican period is problematic, since it helps sustain an



illusion, that it was the republican, homogenizing endeavor that introduced intolerance and that closing that parenthesis will enable Turkey to more or less effortlessly reconnect to its pre-republican, tolerant heritage.

Yet, societal relations in the Ottoman Empire – between Muslims and non-Muslims and between Sunni Muslims and Alevis – were marked more by mutual contempt and fear than by any universal religious-cultural understanding and tolerance. The Ottoman realm grouped a plurality of ethnicities and religious denominations, of parallel societies, but was by definition itself never any society. Similarly, Turkey of today displays a multitude of identities – pluribus – but is deficient on a sense of unity that recognizes the right of “the other” to be different: “E pluribus Unum” is far from being anywhere near the current Turkish reality. The radicalism of that liberal vision in the Turkish context needs to be properly appreciated.

CONCLUSIONS: Indeed, liberalism would represent a more profound departure from tradition than what Kemalism in fact did. State

authoritarianism was not a novelty introduced by Atatürk; it was in part an Ottoman heritage. Kemalism certainly took statism to new heights and it did break with tradition when it embarked on nation-building. Yet, although it was hostile to ethnic aspirations, Kemalist statism refrained from confronting the conservative

worldview of the dominant, Sunni Muslim culture. The persistence of religiously motivated intolerance toward “the other” bears testimony to the Kemalist appeasement of conservatism. The notion of liberalism, on the other hand, challenges the entrenched intolerance that is common to secularists and conservatives alike.

The liberalism of the AKP, indeed very much in the image of the secularism of Kemalism, is at best incomplete, at worst insincere. But the liberal discourse has nevertheless the merit of holding up a mirror to society: Celebrating diversity and acknowledging that the state has a duty to defer to the pluralism of the society serves, whether deliberately or unwittingly, as an invitation to society to examine its values and certitudes. Illiberal government practices inevitably undermine the credibility of the AKP’s liberal discourse. Yet, what ultimately makes democratization elusive is the fact that Turkey the “mosaic” is far removed from the ideals of tolerance evoked by Erdoğan.

THE “EASTERN DIMENSION” IN TURKEY’S FOREIGN POLICY GROWS

M. K. Kaya

Although uncertainty and complications remain, the agreements signed between Turkey and Armenia indicate the potential in expanding Turkey’s possibilities of access to the Caucasus and Central Asia. Furthermore, the cooperation agreements that have recently been signed among Turkic states are destined to eventually have far-reaching cultural, economic and political repercussions. But in these, a leading role is increasingly taken not by Turkey but by Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan.



BACKGROUND: During its first term in power, the AKP government gave priority to developing Turkey’s relations with the EU. Since 2007, the foreign policy of the Turkish government has had the development of the relations with the country’s neighbors in focus. Turkey has signed a number of agreements with its neighbors in accordance with the strategy of “zero problems”, the latest being the recent agreement with

Armenia. Particular priority has been accorded to the Middle Eastern countries, in line with AKP’s ideological, Islamic conservative preferences.

While pursuing a proactive policy towards the EU and the Middle East, the AKP government until Russia’s 2008 attack on Georgia left the Caucasus and Central Asia fronts largely unattended to. After the outbreak of the war, Turkey sought to enter the scene with a proposal called the “Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform”, an attempt that failed to be taken serious by any other country in the region. Despite this setback, the Turkish attempts to assert an influence on the Caucasus and Black Sea fronts have continued. In this context, several protocols were signed with Russia

in August when Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin paid a visit to Ankara. The protocol signed with Armenia obviously represents a significant new step in the evolution of Turkish foreign policy. However, less attention has been paid by international observers to the evolving relations among Turkic states, and the impact they will have on Turkey's foreign policy orientations.

During the immediate period that followed upon the end of the Cold war, Turkey nurtured high hopes of being able to extend its influence to the newly independent Turkic states of Central Asia. Presidents Turgut Özal and Süleyman Demirel were instrumental in developing Turkey's ties to the Turkic world from the Caucasus and beyond to Central Asia. However, much of that impetus was lost in the last decade, with the Turkic dimension of being downgraded in Turkish foreign policy. That downgrading was in part a

reflection of the AKP's ideological estrangement from a Turkic world where the Islamic religious dimension counts less than it does in the Muslim Middle East. On the other hand, economic relations with those countries have continued to develop. The economic growth experienced in both Turkey and in the oil and gas producing Turkic countries has given Turkic relations an important boost. In an environment of ongoing economic development, previously established social and cultural interactions have also come to evolve.

Summit meetings of the Turkic-Speaking Heads of state began in the 1990s at Ankara's initiative. They have continued without being institutionalized and the number of participating countries have fluctuated. During the last decade, contacts between parliamentarians of the Turkic countries have practically ceased. However, at the

summit of the Chairmen of the national assemblies held in Istanbul in November 2008, an agreement was signed regarding the establishment of a parliamentary assembly of Turkic-speaking countries.

IMPLICATIONS: In a summit recently held in Baku, Azerbaijan, a General Secretariat of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Turkic-speaking countries was established. Baku will be the seat of the general secretariat, and Ramil Hasanov from Azerbaijan was appointed as its first secretary-general for a period of four years. The office of the secretary-



general will change hands every four years according to the alphabetic order among the member states, namely: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have yet to join. The names of three holders of offices of deputy secretary general have been announced by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey. The assembly will consist of twenty-four deputies.

On October 2-3, the summit of the Turkic Heads of state was held in Nakhichevan, an autonomous republic of Azerbaijan. This marked another important step in the evolving relations among Turkic states. The summit was the ninth summit since the start in 1992, at the initiative of then Turkish President Turgut Özal. The presidents of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey participated in the summit, while Turkmenistan's vice-president attended. An agreement about the establishment of a Cooperation Council between the Turkic-speaking countries was signed by Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey. With the treaty of Nakhichevan, a Turkic Council has been formally established. The council will have the following organs: a Council of Heads of State, a Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, a Council of Elders, a Council of Senior Public Servants of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, and a Permanent Secretariat.

The seat of the Turkic Council will be Istanbul, and the first term chairmanship was accorded to Turkey. Turkey will appoint the first secretary general, which will rotate every three years.

The Turkic presidents seized the occasion of the Nakhichevan summit to deliver messages of Turkic unity: President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan stated that "We should teach our Turkic identity to our children and to the whole world". Revisiting history, the negative impacts of previous wars in which Turks were pitted against Turks, such as the war between Tamerlane and

the Ottoman sultan Beyazid and the attacks of Genghis Khan were presented at a televised show, with accompanying wishes that such events never be repeated in the future. A decision was taken to establish a Turkic World Academy in Kazakhstan.

Despite persistent invitations that it be represented at the highest level, Turkmenistan, holding on to a policy of neutrality in its foreign policy, continued to attend the summits only at the level of vice president. Meanwhile, the president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, continued his policy of non-attendance. However, the other participating Turkic states reaffirmed their intention to continue their attempts to convince Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to enter the Council.

CONCLUSIONS: The relations between Turkey and the rest of the Turkic world have entered a new era with the establishment of the Assembly of Turkic-speaking parliamentarians and of the Turkic Council. Initially, the development of the relations between Turkey and the Turkic states was hampered by the perception that Turkey was seeking a role as "the elder brother" and was thus met with suspicion by the countries of the region. At that time, these countries had only recently obtained their independence, after experiencing a long period of Russian hegemony; therefore they hesitated to enter into a relationship with Turkey, which seemed to harbor hegemonic aspirations of its own. The Turkic states generally remained aloof from Turkey's proposals for deeper cooperation. However, after twenty years of independence, the Turkic states of the former Soviet Union have accomplished very much in their efforts to become institutionalized and stable states. In particular, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have grown self-confident in their international interactions, as a consequence of the improvements of their economies due to the rise in oil and gas prices. These two countries have

started to interact more actively with their historical and cultural hinterlands.



Timur

The Turkic institutions have all experienced a significant vitalization during the last year. It is notable that this has taken place mainly as a result of initiatives taken by Astana and Baku, rather than by Ankara. Turkey is no longer the driving force behind Turkic cooperation; Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have taken over part of this role. In fact, the AKP's policy of paying less attention to the relations with the Turkic world has inadvertently given an impetus to the development of inter-Turkic relations. The AKP's lack of attention to the Turkic world helped the Turkic countries realize that Turkey's cooperation proposals were not based on hegemonic intentions. Turkey's development of close relations with

Russia has also had a significant impact on Turkic perceptions. The rapprochement between Turkey and Russia has encouraged the Central Asian Turkic countries to further develop Turkic cooperation; paradoxically, they now felt that doing so would not incur Moscow's wrath as had previously been the case, while nevertheless serving as a counterweight to the growth of Russian influence. Finally, the rise of Turkic nationalism that can be observed throughout the region has encouraged the Turkic countries to establish institutions such as the Turkish Council. The cooperation agreements that have been signed between the Turkic states are destined to eventually have far-reaching cultural, economic and political repercussions.

Although uncertainty and complications remain, the implementation of the agreements that have been signed between Turkey and Armenia hold the potential of expanding Turkey's possibilities of access to the Caucasus and Central Asia. Of course, this is likely only under certain conditions. First, Ankara has to succeed in building its relations with Armenia without that occurring at the cost of ruining its relations with Baku ([See September 14, 2009, issue of the Turkey Analyst](#)). Indeed, the danger of Ankara contributing to pushing Azerbaijan into Russia's arms should not be underestimated, given the high degree of mistrust in Baku concerning the AKP government's objectives in its rapprochement with Armenia. But if Ankara can succeed in walking this tightrope, that may help Armenia slowly and gradually relieve itself of Moscow's dominance, enabling a broadening of Turkey's corridor to Central Asia.

WHAT THE COLUMNISTS SAY

The landmark speeches delivered by President Abdullah Gül and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan respectively, in which a new, libertarian discourse about Turkey was presented, heralding a departure from traditional nation state policies, has caught wide attention. The liberal vision presented by Gül and Erdoğan has been generally hailed, although the critics have pointed to the discrepancy that exists between the liberal rhetoric and the AKP government's recent recourse to state authoritarianism.

ÇANDAR: E PLURIBUS UNUM

Cengiz Çandar in *Radikal* makes the observation that president Abdullah Gül took care to deliver a unifying message in his speech to parliament. Listening to the president, I was reminded of the sentence that adorns the national emblem of the United States, “E pluribus Unum”. There was no reason to expect the president to deliver a message that would have created doubts about the continued attachment to the trinity of “one nation, one state and one flag”. What matters more is what that overriding architecture contains. Abdullah Gül stressed that diversities are to be protected, as it befits a democratic state, within a framework of unity. I note that (Kurdish nationalist) DTP-leader Ahmet Türk was pleased with the president's speech. “All that needs to be done is to constitutionally codify what the president has said”, Türk stated. And that is up to the parliament to accomplish.

ŞAHİN: A DIFFERENT LOOK AT GÜL'S SPEECH

Haluk Şahin in *Radikal* describes Abdullah Gül's speech as a landmark event. It is probably the first time ever that a president

of the republic in forceful language has condemned the practice of setting the law aside in the name of the “interests of the state”. Gül's speech was informed by a liberal ideology. It is apparent that the former Islamists have fully adopted a liberal rhetoric, that it makes them feel more secure and more in tune with modernity. The Islamists used to say “don't interfere with our religion”; today they say “no one should interfere with others”. Yet, the question is who is interfering with whom? The supporters of the AKP government are of course quick to point fingers at the usual suspects, the Kemalists in the military and elsewhere. But then, we should ask ourselves who it is that hinders visitors to restaurants in Beykoz in Istanbul of enjoying their raki? Who is it that has raised all kinds of bureaucratic obstacles to wine-growing, urging peasants to grow vegetables instead? Who is that will ensure that Turkey's international grade concerning the freedom of the media will slip even further in the years to come? And who is that does not employ those who are not like themselves, making participation in the prayer and the wearing of the headscarf prerequisites for employment and advancement in the bureaucracy?

ALTAN: ERDOĞAN'S SPEECH WAS MAGNIFICENT

Ahmet Altan in *Taraf* is enamored with the speech that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan gave at the congress of the AKP. It was a magnificent speech. I loved it. Erdoğan, who is supposed to be “conservative”, did something that no other leader has done in the past: he delivered a “progressive” message that no one else had dared to do until now, courageously embracing all those who have been condemned and trampled upon by the official, statist ideology. Erdoğan is a politician who can make sudden u-turns, who can disappoint. Yet, although he has on occasion failed to live up to his promises, he is ultimately a courageous leader. And I believe that Erdoğan's speech marks a point from where there can and will be no return. What characterizes Erdoğan, besides his courage, is his ability to evolve, to educate himself. That is what sets him so much apart from his political rivals, who all remain trapped in the narrow definitions of the past, in “Turkishness” and “Kurdishness”. Erdoğan embraces all these categories. But how are we to explain Erdoğan's remarkable ability to develop? I believe that the explanation is to be found in the fact that Erdoğan competes in an altogether different category than what CHP leader Deniz Baykal or MHP leader Bahçeli does. His views are informed by the relationships that he has come to forge with other world leaders, and by his ambition to be a respected leader at the world stage.

ALKAN: GOOD LUCK, MR. ERDOĞAN

Türker Alkan in *Radikal* wholeheartedly subscribes to Erdoğan's vision. Like the Prime Minister, I believe that our culture has been enriched by diversity and that we should fully embrace its different colors, instead of suppressing them as we have been in the habit of doing. Yet, I cannot but recall other speeches that Erdoğan has delivered, such as the one in which he described minarets as “bayonets”. Has he really changed? Perhaps, we will see. That question notwithstanding, it should be noted that Erdoğan has painted a picture, not of the existent Turkey, but of a Turkey that ought to exist. A good speech, well crafted, can always catch the attention of the nation; it is infinitely more difficult to translate words into reality; to implement the kind of changes in mentality to which Erdoğan referred to in his speech remains a difficult challenge. The discrepancy between the vision presented by Erdoğan in his speech and the actual reality of Turkey was apparent in a recent survey that showed that a majority of our citizens do not want to share neighborhood with atheists, Christians and Jews.

BAYRAMOĞLU: A NEW TURKEY IS BORN

Ali Bayramoğlu in *Yeni Şafak* writes that Turkey rightfully deserves to be called a new Turkey. This country is in the middle of a process of remarkable change. Even the military has changed; it had to. Consequently, the new openings in the Kurdish issue and with Armenia do not run the risk of being endangered by any internal political dynamics, by the military or by nationalism. We are well beyond that point

now. What has made change possible are the international conjuncture – and the evolution of society. The notion of a society polarized along ideological lines has ceased to have any pertinence from a societal perspective. From a society neatly defined by self-enclosed ideological categories, we have evolved to a commonwealth where different value systems (Islam, secularism, nationalism, liberalism etc) not only exist side by side, but are above all in interaction.

ÜLSEVER: THERE IS CONSIDERABLE OPPOSITION TO THE KURDISH OPENING AMONG THE PUBLIC

Cüneyt Ülsever in *Hürriyet* notes that opinions surveys indicate that the public remains conspicuously reticent about the Kurdish opening of the AKP government. One survey, commissioned by the AKP, reveals that 48 percent support the opening, with 35 percent expressing a negative view. Another poll shows 55 percent in favor, with 45 percent objecting to the Kurdish opening. These figures deserve to be carefully studied. Nobody should rejoice at the levels of support for the initiative. Keeping in mind that the specifics of the initiative remain to be disclosed, the Kurdish opening so far only amounts to a declaration of the intention to bring the war to a close, to save lives, to which no one should object. Thus, the levels of support for the initiative should have been close to 100 percent. The fact that there is on the contrary considerable opposition

represents a serious caveat. Apparently, there is widespread suspicion that the opening will entail concessions to the PKK. The project of “national unity” is about to turn into a prescription for “national dissolution”.

ULAGAY: PERHAPS WE WERE BETTER OFF DURING THE REIGN OF THE MILITARY JUNTA?

Osman Ulagay in *Milliyet* feels deeply worried by the way Prime Minister Erdoğan keeps on defending the astronomic tax fine imposed on the Doğan Media group. Every sentence uttered by Erdoğan – most recently in an interview accorded to the Wall Street journal, where the Prime Minister declared that the under-vegetation in the economy is going to be “cleaned up” – exudes the conviction that “I have the power of the state in my hands, and I can use it as I see fit”. Thinking about this, I recall those years in the early 1980s when I was employed at the daily *Cumhuriyet*. Being a journalist during those days, under a military junta, was never easy, and our daily was twice shut down. Nevertheless, we mostly managed to figure out where the boundaries lay, and managed to avoid drawing the fire of the regime. It is more difficult to anticipate the actions of our current rulers, since we are unaccustomed to their ethics and unsure about their moral and judiciary codes. And, it is well known that a government that enjoys wide popular support can feel less restrained in its execution of arbitrary state power.