

Teim



TEIM Election Watch Analysis

OCCASIONAL ANALYSIS:

**TURKEY / A model for democratisation
in the Arab World?**

Carmen Rodríguez

Date of Publication: 17 March 2011

Observatorio Electoral

Taller de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

www.election-watch.org

www.opemam.org

ISSN: being processed

www.observatorioelectoral.es

Turkey is a country undergoing a transition to democracy, not a consolidated democracy. If it is to be the exemplary model that some commentators refer to, it must first complete its own reforms successfully. Turkey is without doubt, a unique and complex country, that is still struggling to free itself from the legacy it has inherited of authoritarian politics, marked by interventionist coups. On the other hand, Turkey does have prior democratic experience, a solid institutional framework and a civil society capable of channelling significant proposals for change. After the 1980 coup d'état, the country experienced a transition led by the Army that assured the military establishment a decisive role and substantially curtailed rights and freedoms. The political parties that were outlawed in 1981, slowly rebuilt themselves over a decade. Subsequently, their institutional weakness and/or lack of resolve and conviction prevented substantial reform of a political system whose transition had been strongly guided by the military.

The boost for Turkey's EU candidacy given by the European Council meeting in Helsinki in 1999, led to system-wide reforms, driven first - between 1999 and 2002 - by a complicated coalition government made up of three parties, and since then propelled by the AKP which has held an absolute majority since the general elections of 2002. For the first time in Turkey, all topics of debate were placed on the table. After the opening of negotiations in 2005, according to the metaphor of Gareth Jenkins, Turkey's democratic spring has given way to a democratic winter. The damage to the impetus towards democratization can, undoubtedly, be attributed to many factors, but the messages from certain EU governments maligning Turkey's candidacy and calling for other classes of relationship, have been pivotal in contributing to this 'winter'. As have, likewise, the unbalanced policies of the governing party, the AKP, that lives alongside a divided opposition that has failed to make the democratic process its enterprise.

The 2011 general elections and the project to draw up a new constitution will be crucial for steering the democratization process Turkey is engaged in, onto the right path. For his part, Kemal Kiliçdaroglu, the new leader of Turkey's main opposition party the CHP, has given a new twist to his party's policy, positioning it in favour of a new constitution and new democratic reforms, which is in contrast to the position of his predecessor, who defended the status quo.

In their analyses, more than one Turkish commentator has warned that using Turkey as a role model could obscure a much more complex reality. In addition, the interest in stability in the region may, once again impel western countries to support semi-democratic regimes, implying that this is sufficient for Muslim-majority countries. As Soli Ozel points out, "the quality of Turkey's democracy risks being overshadowed by the image of a democratic Turkey."

Some Turkish analysts have also complained that Turkey is being held up as an Islamic model of democracy. For these analysts, democracy, Islam and a market economy must go hand in hand as well with a process of secularization. It is worth recalling that Turkey while it has a Muslim majority is not a homogeneous country. Respect for ethnic and religious diversity is essential for real democratization to take place.

Mutual influence

The possibility that the revolutions in the Arab world may positively influence Turkey's democratization process should also be considered. The European Union has lost its place as a democratic model to which Turkey wants to aspire. This loss of credibility is not limited exclusively to Turkey. This same

disenchantment at the role the EU has played in democratization processes in third-party countries can be observed in the Spanish press. This said, the influence of accession negotiations on Turkey's democratization process at a day-to-day level, should not be underestimated. But the EU's frosty stance towards the Turkish democratization reforms may be offset, by the new winds of democratization that are sweeping neighbouring countries; winds that may yet move Turkey towards some critical, comprehensive and more optimistic review of the process it is engaged in.

In turn, the image of Turkey in the Arab world has improved significantly in recent years, and the phenomenon of the AKP, a party that emerged from previously outlawed Islamist parties, is followed with great attention from as far afield as the Justice and Development Party in Morocco to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The AKP has presented itself as a conservative democratic party, not an Islamist party, although some of its policies do cause hostility from Turkey's more secular sectors. If the AKP does manage to carry out its integrated and reform-minded policies, this will undoubtedly have a positive effect regionally. This said, Turkey's credibility abroad does depend on its credibility internally, especially in terms of managing its internal dynamics and conflicts.