A political earthquake in Turkey

An analysis of the prospects of the JDP government in Turkey

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The recent elections in Turkey came at a time of deep economical insecurity. Accordingly, the success of the victorious Justice and Development Party has been down to economical, rather than ideological considerations of the voters. In addition, the party's Islamic roots have been softened towards a mainstream centre-right agenda, in tune with Turkey's secular traditions. But how will this single-party majority government fare and what is to be expected for the countries' possible future in the European Union?

On the evening of November 3, as the final vote count came in, an earthquake shook Turkish politics. The three governing parties that had formed the coalition government after the 1999 national election, as well as the two opposition parties, all failed to pass the 10 per cent national threshold and found themselves left outside the parliament as total losers in this election. At the time when Turkey was going through its deepest economic crisis, generating severe problems of unemployment, poverty and insecurity, the November 3 national election resulted in the electoral punishment of both the governing parties and the opposition parties, to such an extent that the winner of the 1999 election, the Democratic Left Party (DLP), lost almost its entire constituency, bringing the long political career of its leader, Bülent Ecevit, to a tragic but, in the eyes of many voters, deserved end. The other governing coalition parties, the Nationalist Action Party (NAP) and the Motherland Party (MLP) lost more than half of their electoral support. Their leaders both announced their resignations. The opposition parties, the True Path Party (TPP) and the Felicity Party (FP) were also subjected to electoral punishment in the sense that instead of gaining any electoral support, both were left outside the parliament. It can be argued therefore that the November 3 national election has indeed created a political tremor in Turkey. The election took the form of a social backlash, in that it created a suitable platform for the democratic expression of the deep anger Turkish people have been feeling since the 1990s towards the existing political system and its constituent political parties whose modus vivendi was characterized by economic populism, clientelism, corruption and democratic deficiencies.

The winner of the election was the Justice and Development Party (JDP), followed by the
Republican People’s Party (RPP). By receiving 34.2 per cent of the popular vote and with the aid of the undemocratic 10 per cent national threshold, the JDP gained 66 per cent of the parliamentary seats (that is, 363 of 550 seats) and formed a single party majority government. With its 19.4 per cent of the popular votes, the RRP became the main and single opposition party gaining a total of 178 seats. For the next five years, Turkey will probably be ruled by this government with a very strong executive structure, and a two-party parliamentary composition. After having had a series of extremely problematic coalition governments, the general public opinion before the election in Turkey pointed to the need of putting an end to the existing ineffective, undemocratic and incapable governing structure that had been operating totally detached from the society and its needs. Although the JDP has come into existence as one of the two parties (the other being the FP) that emerged from within the constitutionally banned Virtue Party whose Islamic identity and discourse had been judged by the Supreme Court to pose a threat to the secular foundations of the Turkish Republic, its electoral success leading to a strong majority government has been received very well by a large part of the Turkish public longing for political stability and effective governing. The question here is to what extent and in what way the JDP can succeed in governing effectively and democratically so that the post-election optimism in Turkish society towards the alleviation of its severe economic problems of unemployment, poverty and growth becomes justified. In seeking an adequate answer to this question, it is necessary to analyze both the peculiarities of the historical context in which the November 3 national election took place and the way in which the JDP presented itself to the Turkish electorate and achieved to mobilize enough social support to emerge as the winner of the election. In what follows, I will offer a sociological and political economy-based analysis of this national election and the identity of the JDP. This analysis will also allow us both to approach the JDP without ideological prejudice and to foresee the possibility of certain contradictions, limitations and democratic deficiencies emerging in the course of its government.

The peculiarity of the November 3rd national election

For an adequate analysis of the electoral victory of the JDP, we have to understand the historical context that has rendered this election singular in the sense that it has created a turning-point in Turkish politics. This singularity has two aspects and differentiates the November 3 national election from the previous elections in 1999 and 1995. Firstly, as opposed to the two previous elections, the central issue in the November 3 national election was economy- rather than ideology-based. Due to the problems presented by political Islam and Kurdish nationalism, both of which were perceived by the state as fundamental threats to the secular and unitary foundation of the Turkish Republic, the 1999 and 1995 national elections
took place in a very narrow space between politics and the state, and thus the main platform on which political parties competed pertained to the question how the state could be protected from the perceived threats rather than addressing the problems and needs of the citizens. Hence these elections were state-centred rather than society-centred and issues such as national security and political stability rather than democracy and economic development predominated Turkish politics and played an extremely important role in determining the electoral support for the state-centric and nationalist parties (that is, for the DLP and the NAP).

Contrary to the 1995 and 1999 elections, however, the November 3 national election focused on social issues, where the economy and public welfare were dominant. In a country which had been going through its most severe and deep economic crisis, the question of how to overcome the economic crisis in an adequate and efficient way to solve the devastating problems of economic recession, unemployment and poverty became naturally the fundamental point of reference by which political parties prepared their respective election programs, crafted their election slogans and made their campaign promises to the electorate. It is very clear from the election results that economic problems have to a great extent determined the electoral support for the JDP and the RPP, and also acted as a form of punishment for the governing- and opposition parties in the National Assembly. It can be argued in this sense that an adequate analysis of the electoral victory of the JDP has to take into account the significant fact that economy rather than ideology has shaped the basic characteristic of the November 3 national election as a society-centred rather than state-centred process.

The second factor that has made this election singular
concerns “the identity of the actors” playing an important role in the determination of the voters’ preference. In the 1995 and 1999 elections, the identity of the actors involved were “national” in nature and limited to the political parties and the state. Contrarily, the recent election constitutes a specific and peculiar moment in Turkish politics, insofar as it involved not only political parties as main actors competing to win the election, but also non-state actors such as economic pressure groups, non-governmental organizations and international entities (mainly the IMF and the EU). Not only have these NGO’S functioned as important discursive reference points against which political parties positioned themselves and formulated their own political and economic programs regarding the question of how to govern society effectively and efficiently; but they also have acted as influential actors in their role of shaping public opinion and the deliberation regarding the need for a strong and stable government able to cope with the pressing problems of Turkish society. The election results indicate that these non-state actors were successful in influencing the vote and in creating an electoral support for the winners of the election. In this sense, the historical context in which this election has taken place was not only national, but also global, in that it involved local, national, and global actors, and placed “economy” at the centre of the election process.

The identity and the electoral strategy of the JDP

The combination of these two factors, which determined the specific and peculiar character of the November 3 national election and jolted the Turkish political class also give us a crucial insight for an understanding of both the electoral victory of the JDP and the quantitative rather than qualitative success of the RPP. I would suggest, in this sense, that the way in which the JDP achieved an
electoral victory big enough to form a single-party majority government consists of a three-dimensional election strategy. It is through this strategy that the JDP has established a successful organic linkage with the different segments of society. First, by understanding very well that the early election on November 3 was to be a society-centred process with the economy as the dominant issue, the JDP presented itself to the public not as an Islamic Party but as “a centre-right party”, claiming to have a strong will to govern effectively on the basis of well-prepared and effective policies to overcome the economic crisis. In doing so, the JDP attempted to convince the electorate that the party has shifted from being an ideology-based party whose constituency is defined by its Islamic identity to a centre-right party concerned about the problems of society at large. Secondly, the JDP has argued that in its attempt to create a new impetus for economic change by cleaning up “the cronyism and corruption that have hobbled Turkey’s banking and financial system for decades”, it would act to serve the public at large by addressing mindfully the needs and demands of different segments of the society, especially of those groups that have been directly hit by unemployment, impoverishment and socio-economic insecurity. Thus, differently from the RPP’s economic program, prepared by Kemal Dervis (former cabinet minister in charge of the economy) in unquestioned acceptance of the IMF structural adjustment program, the JDP promised to place the deep-rooted problem of “social injustice” at the centre of its immediate economic program even if it were to conflict the IMF. Thirdly, in establishing an organic linkage with society at large, the JDP insisted that democracy constitutes the fundamental and effective basis for the long-term solution to Turkey’s problems. This heavy emphasis on democracy has been maintained and voiced strongly in the JDP’s discourse on the protection of individual rights and
freedoms, as well as in its full support for Turkey’s integration into the EU as a full member.

I would argue that through this three-dimensional election strategy, the JDP not only connected successfully with the society and won the election, but was also able to present its identity not as primarily Islamic, but as centre-rightist, with its primary aim both to overcome the economic crisis and to work for the further democratization of the relationship between the state and citizens. Thus, the JDP created a suitable ground to single itself out from among the other parties in the following (and convincing) ways:

(a) it differentiated itself from the parties of the coalition government (the DLP, the NAP and the MLP) by claiming that as opposed to the state-centred nature of these parties, it would give priority to the citizen, and thus listen to the social actors, such as economic pressure groups and NGO’s;
(b) it differentiated itself also from the FP and its Islamic nature by arguing that in government the JDP would be democratic and represent a moderate Islamic discourse which would respect the secular foundations of the Turkish Republic and conceive of religious affairs within the context of pluralism and civil rights;
(c) finally, it differentiated itself from its main competitor, the RPP, by suggesting that the economic program it will initiate to overcome the crisis is more humane than the one proposed by the latter, in that it would not only pay more attention to the problem of heavily skewed income distribution and social injustice, but also would support the medium and small-scale businesses to vitalize the production sector of the Turkish economy.

The JDP and the communitarian (conservative)-liberal synthesis
Through these points of differentiation, the JDP garnered public support for itself, especially from the medium and small-scale business people, whose numbers and economic activity have been growing all across the country. It also established class alliances with the poor and disadvantaged groups, and mobilized NGO’s, voicing the needs of religious segments of society in terms of recognition. Bolstered by public support, class-alliances and effective campaigning, the JDP entered the election. The Turkish electorate found the JDP convincing enough to give it a big majority in the National Assembly.

I define the economic program of the JDP as a communitarian-liberal synthesis, (or conservative-liberal, if you like) which operates on the basis of three principles:

(i) an effective and post-developmental state: which is democratic, transparent and accountable in its interaction with the citizenship, but at the same time “caring” and assuming a supervisory role in its relation to the economy. In this context, the JDP claims that in its term it will change the existing governmental structure which is detached from the public, blind to the needs and demands of citizens, therefore functioning as a closed, ineffective and undemocratic system of rule, and will create an effective and post-developmental state;
(ii) a regulated free-market: which is not destructive and corrupt, but enriching, contributing to economic development and social justice. The JDP argues that it stands for a free-market economy and sees it as the driving force for growth, to the extent that it will contribute to further industrialization and to the consolidation of the economy on the basis of stable finance and strong and solid economic activity;
(iii) social justice: which is to be established both in terms of distribution of wealth and welfare services and with
respect to the domain of recognition in which social segments will not be discriminated in terms of their different cultural backgrounds. At this level, The JDP’s economic program differentiates itself from the RPP’s liberal economic program approaching the issue of social justice as a collateral problem at best. In doing so, the JDP argues that a strong, stable economy worthy of public confidence couldn’t be established without solving the problem of social justice in distribution and recognition.

Working on the basis of these principles, the communitarian-liberal synthesis means at the very general level an articulation of the free-market with communitarian values, which appreciates religious beliefs, societal norms and local characteristics. More concretely, the communitarian-liberal synthesis calls for a just society not organised on the basis of pure egotistical individualism, but as a democratic regulation of the state-citizen relations in which free-market rationality is backed by, in the JDP government’s prime minister Abdullah Gül’s words, “moderate and democratic Muslim society”.

Challenges for the JDP

The success of the communitarian-liberal synthesis in the November 3 national election should be taken seriously, since it has created a chance for Turkey - maybe the last chance - to have a strong and stable government,

(i) which will establish a reciprocal and democratic relationship between the state and citizenship, so that the disjunction and the widening rift between the ineffective state and the changing society, which have been the main problems of the 90s, can be solved;
(ii) which will cope effectively with urgent severe economic problems to create a better quality of life, financial
stability, job security and sustainable economic development; and
(iii) which will prepare Turkey as a strong and democratic
country for its integration into the European Union.

However, whether or not the JDP can meet these challenges remains to be seen. There may be some hurdles the JDP may have to overcome in the process. They have both international and domestic dimensions, and it is almost impossible to separate these dimensions in the post-election Turkey where global actors such as the EU and the IMF play a very important role in the process of shaping and reshaping Turkish politics. In this regard, there are four main issues:

(a) EU-Turkish relations and the resolution of the Cyprus conflict;
(b) the possibility of a war with Iraq and its effect on relations with the USA;
(c) relations with the IMF;
(d) relations between the state and the governing JDP in terms of secularism;

As a matter of fact, the first confrontation came up immediately after the election, as the JDP found itself facing the very difficult job of obtaining a definite date for the start of negotiations towards an accession to the EU in the Copenhagen Summit. The JDP had to convince also the EU that it is not an Islamic party, but pursues a centre-right policy fully supporting Turkey’s membership in the EU. Although successful in this respect, the JDP did not get what it aspired to, and instead of a definite negotiation date in 2003, was offered a conditional date in December 2004, which stipulated that if Turkey succeeded in the application of the Copenhagen criteria, then the negotiations for accession would start “without further
delay”. However, the Copenhagen Summit has also demonstrated very clearly that the possibility of Turkey’s accession to Europe is contingent upon the resolution of the Cyprus conflict. Both the application of the Copenhagen criteria, which means the end of the strong centrist state tradition in Turkey, and the Cyprus conflict pose a great challenge to the JDP, insofar as both issues could create tension between the state-centred political tradition and the JDP, if the JDP’s problem-solving approach to the issues contradicts the state’s sovereignty-based approach.

Similarly, the JDP’s support for an American invasion of Iraq could create tension between the party and its constituency if the invasion becomes a prolonged affair, creating negative political and economic results for Turkey. We still do not know the possible economic costs of the invasion for the Turkish economy, which has been going through its worst crisis. Nor can we predict the outcome of the invasion regarding the question of Northern Iraq. That is, we do not know whether or not the invasion would result in the creation of an independent Kurdish state. The Turkish state is extremely sensitive about this issue. Although the JDP has already stated that it would support the invasion if authorized by the UN, the aftermath of such an invasion could produce very negative results as far as the JDP is concerned, in that it might cause the party to loose its public support for which it has been working very hard and may very well be not restituted.

The third possible confrontation for the JDP concerns relations with the IMF. As a country whose attempt to overcome its worst economic crisis is financed by the IMF and whose “strong economy program” is dictated by the IMF’s structural adjustment policy, Turkey must live with
the IMF. This means that any governing party in Turkey would always be in a position to face the objections, and demands (if not impositions) coming from the IMF. The JDP is not immune from such obligations, either. If its economic policies contradict the structural adjustment program, the JDP will definitely find itself confronted by the IMF. More concretely, JDP’s attempts to give primacy to the problem of social and distributive injustice may create tension in its relations with the IMF. Similarly, if the JDP pursues a post-developmental policy, trying to create resources for medium and small-scale business without creating macroeconomic financial stability, it will again have to face the IMF. On the other hand, if the JDP would not attempt to make these moves and act in conformity with IMF’s recipes, it may face the danger of losing its constituency support and class alliances.

Finally, JDP’s relations with the state can be prone to generating tension and antagonism, especially in terms of the question of secularism which has been embodied in the popular “headscarf issue”. If the JDP takes a strong position on this, the secular elite will perceive it as endorsing political Islam which would, in turn, give rise to tension. However, if the JDP ignores the issue, its hardcore supporters, the social segments defining their identity primarily with reference to Islam, are bound to be disappointed. Moreover, given the fact that none of the Islamic parties in Turkish political history since the 70s, namely the National Order Party, the National Salvation Party, the National Welfare Party, the Virtue Party – in order of succession – could escape being banned by the Supreme Court, the question of secularism has the potential to constitute the most threatening fault line and the strongest domestic challenge for the JDP.

In this sense, the fact that the JDP has formed a single-
The party majority government in Turkey does not necessarily mean that it has the “power” to rule according to its own economic, political and cultural program. We know that their communitarian-liberal synthesis won the November 3 national election. But we do not know whether or not it could be brought to life as an effective socio-economic economic program. The translation of political success into governing capability is what will define the nature of Turkish politics and determine the fate of the JDP in near future.

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