

# Akp's Hegemony Limits and Turkey's Choice. Democratization or Political Adventurism?

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**Akp's hegemony limits and Turkey's choice**

**Democratization or political adventurism?**

**Dr. Nikolaos Stelgias**

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## Abstract:

Twelve years since its rise to power, Turkey's ruling Party of Justice and Development (AKP) has focused its attention to the implementation of a "grand project", planned to boost AKP's, its leader's and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's dominance in Turkish politics. This "grand project" is the adoption of a new constitution, which will establish a presidential system of government. Since his election, as President of the Turkish Republic, Erdoğan continuously seek new political allies in order to gain and gather support for a new constitution. One potential ally could be the Kurds. Alternatively, nationalists could also help Erdoğan re-affirm his own dominant role in Turkish politics.

## Key Words:

Turkey, AKP, Erdoğan, Davutoğlu, constitution, Kurdish Problem

## Highlights

- Erdoğan's project to boost AKP's dominance
- AKP's bitter victory in the last presidential elections
- The quest for new political allies
- AKP's political hegemony limits
- Democratization, decentralization or political adventurism: Turkey's choice

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# Akp's Hegemony Limits and Turkey's Choice. Democratization or Political Adventurism?

## 1. Introduction: AKP's plan for a new constitution and Erdoğan's effort to boost AKP's dominance in Turkish politics

Twelve years since its rise to power, AKP has focused its attention to the implementation of a "grand project", planned to boost AKP's, its leader's and Erdoğan's dominance in Turkish politics. This "grand project" is the adoption of a new constitution, which will establish a presidential system of government, which seems to suit better to Erdoğan's "needs" and political agenda. AKP's first attempt to amend the Turkish constitution came right after the 2007 parliamentary elections, when AKP won an impressive 46% share of the votes. Erdogan personally tasked a group of academics (liberal in thought) to prepare a draft constitution. Indeed, Erdoğan's team produced a liberal constitutional draft, which cleared Turkey's political turmoil of that period<sup>1</sup>.

In 2011 parliamentary elections, AKP won some 50% of the votes but failed to win the necessary three-fifths majority in parliament (or 330 seats), which is the minimum requirement to call a referendum for constitutional amendment. Consequently, AKP joined a parliamentary "constitutional commission" along with three other parties. The commission managed to achieve consensus in some issues, but engaged into bitter discussions and disputes on other issues, like the definition of "Turkish Citizenship".

Amani underlines that the dispute between AKP and the opposition parties is mainly centered around two sets of issues: (a) Political liberalization (civil and political rights etc.) and (a) Separation of powers:

"Political tensions have further escalated in response to Prime Minister Erdogan's avowed interest in devising a new division of powers between the judiciary, legislature, and executive. Under AKP's plan, a separately elected president rather than prime minister dependent on the confidence of the Parliament would be responsible for running the state on a day-to-day basis. A powerful

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1 Akyol Mustafa 2013. "Turkey May Find Itself With AKP Constitution", Al Monitor, 31 January 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/01/turkey-akp-constitution-erdogan-referendum.html>, Accessed 25 November 2014

president, in the government's narrative, represents a democratic solution to the problem of political instability that will sooner or later return to Turkey. The underlying logic is that presidents can run their countries without being affected by the partisan bickering attributed to parliaments. Moreover, the winner-take-all nature of the post would eliminate the possibility of a coalition government—something that reminds Turkish citizens of the turbulent years preceding Erdoğan's rise to power. AKP also plans to reshape the institutional structure and jurisdiction of Turkey's judiciary. The changes would centralize different quasi-independent higher courts under a Constitutional Court that will have a more limited power of judicial review. The most contentious element, however, has been AKP's suggestion that the empowered president should appoint nearly half of the justices without any oversight of the Parliament"<sup>2</sup>.

Amani's remarks help us understand AKP's real motives regarding the new constitution. According to AKP, a new constitution must address the two principle needs of Erdoğan and his government. In one hand, it must help government (any government), to free itself from the chains and the burdens of the so-called "ancient regime". For AKP, the 1982 constitution, a genuine bi-product of a military dictatorship, is unable to address the problems, the challenges and the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In other words, the current constitution simply cannot re-establish ties, peace and harmony between the Turks (Sunni Muslims) and the ethnic and religious minorities of Turkey:

"It is quite obvious that Turkey needs a new constitution to replace the old constitution of 1982, which was crafted by military regime and contains a number of authoritarian elements. The new constitution is necessary to guarantee the rights and freedom of various groups that make up the Turkish society ranging from religious conservatives to the secularists, Kurds, Alawites and other minorities"<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand, the establishment of a presidential system "must" guarantee AKP's dominance in Turkish politics. The current constitution states that the role of the president is rather ceremonial. Under a new constitution, AKP will try to elect a president who will have the ability and the necessary legitimacy to run the affairs of the state effectively. Since the time of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan strongly desires to be the second President of modern Turkey who has the last and final word in government. In other words, Erdoğan want to be given full executive powers, in order to prevent "problems in terms of ... democratic equilibriums":

"A new route in the Presidency is not only the issue of Erdoğan and AK Party. Where Turkey is standing now, and will also be standing post-elections, is a point. This middle point points to a tight and slippery corporate platform, which requires movement. A president who has the authority to

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2 Amani Aslan 2013. "Turkey's Growing Constitutional Conundrum, Open Democracy", 22 March 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/aslan-amani/turkeys-growing-constitutional-conundrum>, Accessed 25 November 2014.

3 Öniş Ziya 2014. "Monopolizing the Center: The AKP and the Uncertain Path of Turkish Democracy", Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies, 10 August 2014, [http://www.suits.su.se/polopoly\\_fs/1.200640.1408970851!/menu/standard/file/Onis%20Monopolizing%20the%20center-Final%20Draft%2019%20August%202014.pdf](http://www.suits.su.se/polopoly_fs/1.200640.1408970851!/menu/standard/file/Onis%20Monopolizing%20the%20center-Final%20Draft%2019%20August%202014.pdf), Accessed 24 November 2014.

mold the state structure and continue the state ideology without carrying any political or judicial responsibility, in brief, who owns the “guardianship power”, and who also carries the legitimacy of being directly chosen by the public on top of this power, is free of executive authorities contrary to the definition of legitimacy (...)”<sup>4</sup>.

During 2013 and 2014, AKP formed and implemented its strategy to local and presidential elections, having in mind Erdoğan's ultimate goal i.e. a new presidential system of government. AKP saw the last presidential election (held on 10 August 2014) as a crash test for the so-called “new constitution project”. The 2011 parliamentary elections taught AKP a useful lesson: The key for the adoption of a new constitution is the three-fifths majority of 330 seats in parliament. Should the votes, gained by Erdoğan and his party, be a prelude and a clear message of a new electoral triumph for AKP and a new constitution for Turkey? After all, an “easy” victory in the presidential elections, would present AKP with the opportunity to surprise the opposition by calling early parliamentary elections, paving the way for a 330 majority in the next parliament. With opinion polls predicting a turnout of 80% and 55% for Erdoğan, AKP had every reason to expect an “easy victory”, even in the first round<sup>5</sup>.

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4 Bayramoğlu Ali 2014. “The result of the elections is obvious, the problem is afterwards...”, Yeni Şafak English, 8 July 2014, <http://english.yenisafak.com/mobil/columns/AliBayramoglu/the-result-of-the-elections-is-obvious-the-problem-is-afterwards-2004188>, Accessed 24 November 2014.

5 2014. “Turkish Presidential Election: Results and Analysis”, APCO Worldwide, 11 August, 2014, <http://www.apcoworldwide.com/content/PDFs/2014-Turkish-Presidential-Election-Results-and-Analysis.pdf>, Accessed 24 November 2014.

## 2. AKP's bitter victory and the quest for new allies

### 2.1. Presidential elections: A bitter victory for Erdoğan and AKP

On 10 August 2014, a 73% turnout ensured no run-offs, thus favoring Erdoğan. With nearly 52% of the votes, Erdoğan was elected President of the Turkish Republic. However, it was a bitter victory. Election results showed that the "55%" goal was simply unobtainable, if not unrealistic. None the less, Erdoğan took his rightful place in Turkish History as the first popularly elected President of the Turkish Republic. But Erdoğan and his party still have a long distance to cover in order to carry-out the sweeping political changes they want, some of which will affect and alter the very heart of the Turkish political system<sup>6</sup>. In any case 51,8% is simply not enough for AKP because it does not secure the needed 330 seats.

After elections, AKP was seeking new political allies and alliances. In his new-build presidential palace, the so-called "Aksaray", Erdoğan desperately needs new allies in order to achieve his ultimate political goal, which is the adoption of a new constitution. Firstly, he needed a true and loyal ally to succeed him as Prime Minister. Immediately after his election, Erdoğan turned his attention to AKP, since both offices he used to hold (i.e. that of Prime Minister and AKP's leader) were vacant. At the same time many high-ranking government and party officials and members flirted with the idea of being Erdoğan's successors. Many others proposed Abdullah Gül, as both party leader and Prime Minister. However, Erdoğan rejected this option. Instead, he supported his Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu. In late August, the new AKP leader formed his cabinet. Davutoğlu's loyalty to Erdogan suggests and implies an easy cohabitation. Davutoğlu also gets along with Turkey's national intelligence organization (MIT) chief and Erdogan's most trusted lieutenant, Hakan Fidan. Davutoğlu stated that he will continue Erdogan's confrontation with Fethullah Gülen, a Pennsylvania-based cleric whose followers, in police force and the judiciary, are supposed to be behind the recent corruption cases against Erdogan and his friends<sup>7</sup>.

In this new period in Turkish politics, Davutoğlu's presence as Prime Minister and AKP's leader is regarded as a necessary political guarantee for President Erdoğan, which would ensure his dominance in Turkish politics. In close co-operation with Davutoğlu, Erdoğan now has the opportunity to influence government's policies and to control political developments within AKP.

### 2.2. The quest for new allies: AKP seek Kurdish support

In order to amend the current constitution Erdoğan need allies. One potential ally could be the Kurds. Alternatively, nationalists could also help Erdoğan re-affirm his dominant role in Turkish

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6 2014. "Does Erdogan's Victory Herald the Start of a New Era for Turkey?", Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 25 August 2014, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/604de9b6-b6af-4491-9ffa-95eee398d009>, Accessed 24 November 2014.

7 2014. "Davutoğlu's Moment", The Economist, 30 August 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21614191-turkeys-new-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-picks-loyal-prime-minister-davutoglus-moment>, Accessed 24 November 2014.

politics. Erdoğan's decision on which one will be his new political ally will determine the content and the character of the new constitution. Why? Because the new constitution will be the product of a compromise between Erdoğan's desires and his ally's demands. So the question remains: Will the new Turkish political system be liberal and decentralized or nationalistic and centralized?

Four months since its last electoral victory, AKP's preferred scenario call for co-operation with the Kurdish Autonomy Movement. For this reason, AKP proposed a limited constitutional amendment (the so-called "short" constitution), which will enhance the presidential system, while at the same time will maintain a balance between the Turks and the ethnic and religious minorities of Turkey. The so-called "Turkish Identity" will be a common one for all Turkish citizens, who will enjoy constitutionally guaranteed civil liberties, human rights, and the right to use their own native language<sup>8</sup>. Apart from the "short" constitution, the Turkish government also proposed a solution to the Kurdish Problem, based on dialog and the normalization of everyday life in the South-East Kurdish-dominated regions of Turkey:

"The Kurdish issue exists in this country. But are we going to live with this problem until death? We launched our Kurdish initiative in 2009. You told us to abolish martial law in the Southeast and we did. Isn't TRT 6 (a Kurdish channel) on air 24 hours a day? We paved the way for a permanent solution [to the Kurdish issue] for the first time. (...) We will solve this problem together. We will make a new constitution and pass it together (...)"<sup>9</sup>.

For AKP, a solution to the Kurdish Problem is a crucial factor, both for its domestic political hegemony and for the unity of Turkey as an independent state. The solution process is "a unique, domestic, historic and strategic process" that serves Turkish national interests: "The Solution process is national, domestic and unique. As it is a product of the sons of this land, it must be protected against external influences"<sup>10</sup>.

AKP understand this "solution process" as the solution to all major security concerns of Turkey in the eve of the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

"We will either choose a way that could unite our land based on peace and mutual respect. This way is our choice. Or we will come under the impact of terrorist and radical groups that declare war on pluralist structures by disguising them as religious and Islamic archaic structures. We well know how Turkey will be released from its shackles, and how the foreign plots will fail when the

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8 For the related proposal of AKP see the declaration of AKP's MP, Professor Burhan Kuzu at Burhan Kuzu'dan Anayasa İpuçları, Türk Dil ve Edebiyat Derneği, <http://www.tded.org.tr/bpi.asp?caid=259&cid=2323>, Accessed 24 November 2014.

9 For the related speech of President Erdoğan see 2011. "Erdoğan calls for Turkish-Kurdish unity in Diyarbakır speech", Today's Zaman, 1 June 2011, [http://www.todayszaman.com/national\\_erdogan-calls-for-turkish-kurdish-unity-in-diyarbakir-speech\\_245882.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/national_erdogan-calls-for-turkish-kurdish-unity-in-diyarbakir-speech_245882.html), Accessed 24 November 2014.

10 For the related speech of Prime Minister Davutoğlu see 2014. "PM Discusses Solution Process With Wise Man", Yeni Şafak English, 19 October 2014, <http://english.yenisafak.com/mobil/politics/pm-discusses-solution-process-with-wise-men-2025054>, Accessed 24 November 2014.

solution process proves successful"<sup>11</sup>.

During the last weeks of 2012, the Turkish government re-opened negotiations with the Kurdish Autonomy Movement. By trying to solve the long-lasting Kurdish Problem, Erdoğan sought Kurdish support for his "new constitution project". In early 2013, Erdoğan announced that his government had opened negotiations with the jailed Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan. On 21 March 2013, after several months of negotiations, Ocalan's letter to his people was read both in Turkish and Kurdish during the Newroz celebrations in Amed (Diyarbakır). In his letter Ocalan called for a cease-fire, disarmament and withdrawal of Kurdish fighters from Turkish territory, thus the end of the armed struggle. The military wing of the Kurdish Autonomy Movement announced that it accepts Ocalan's proposals. This announcement followed by a withdrawal of some Kurdish units from Turkey. Simultaneously, a second phase of negotiations began, which would include (if successful) constitutional and legal changes towards the recognition of human and civil rights for the Kurdish population living in Turkey. During these negotiations the Turkish government announced its long-awaited list of "wise men", i.e. members of a commission charged with the task to publicly explain the ongoing negotiation process with the Kurds.

In October 2014, negotiations faced serious setbacks as a result of the developments unfolded in northern Syria. At the end of summer 2014 the military wing of the Kurdish Autonomy Movement accused Turkey for its covered support to the self-proclaimed "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS). According to high ranking Kurdish officials, Ankara provided military and financial support to the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" (IS), undermining Kurdish national interests in Iraq and Syria. Kurdish accusations gathered new momentum after the release of 46 Turkish hostages in Mosul and the attack of IS fighters against the Kurdish town Kobani, in northern Syria. In 6-7 October, millions of Kurds protested and clashed with Turkish security forces, as Kurdish guerrilla fighters in Kobani and elsewhere called for political and moral support. The result was dozens of deaths. After a short period of hesitation, the Turkish government regained confidence and declared its determination to continue the negotiation process. Few months before the parliamentary election of June 2015, the Kurdish Autonomy Movement is still regarded as a useful ally to the Turkish government in its struggle to adopt a new constitution.

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11 Ibid.

### 3. AKP's hegemony limits: The Kurds, Western Turkey, and the unpredictable economic developments

The tragic events that took place last October showed that the adoption of a new constitution in Turkey is a long and painful way, full of obstacles. Any potential or future ally will certainly strengthen AKP's hopes for the establishment of a presidential system in the near future. But, at the same time, any ally (especially the Kurds) with its independent agenda, which in many cases contradict AKP's priorities and interests, along with the opposition parties, define and set the limits of Erdoğan's and AKP's dominant role in Turkish politics. During the last weeks of 2014, the Kurds, the Gezi's mentality and dynamic, along with the unpredictable economic developments in Turkey's southern borders have endanger government's effort to create the necessary favorable conditions for the adoption of a new constitution.

It is more than clear that co-operation between AKP and the Kurds is not certain at all. The lack of trust between the two sides raises doubts and questions regarding the outcome of the ongoing negotiations. Moreover, Kurdish demands for greater autonomy (i.e. state decentralization and the creation of an autonomous region called "Kurdistan" within Turkey) will certainly produce a wave of pessimism regarding the final outcome of the entire negotiation process. Up to now, the Turkish government has made clear that is not ready to discuss or accept such demands. What the Turkish government discuss is the disarmament of the Kurdish fighters, the expansion and enhancement of civil liberties and the free use of the Kurdish language.

The question is what kind of future awaits Turkey if Ankara chose to turn its back to the Kurdish demands? What if Davutoğlu's worst fear comes true? What if Turkey "will not be released from its shackles" and fail to find a permanent solution to the so-called Kurdish Question? AKP's answer to these questions is a well-known political formula: A center-right traditional line, which states that if negotiations fail to reach a compromise, AKP will apply a mixture of harsh police-like measures, a nationalistic policy, and a populist stance. An early example of this kind of action came during the 2011 parliamentary elections campaign. Aiming to the votes of the nationalists, Erdoğan mentioned the possibility of executing Abdullah Öcalan! Moreover, few weeks after the elections, the government halted negotiations with the Kurds and conducted preemptive strikes against officials of the Kurdish Autonomy Movement<sup>12</sup>.

During 2011-2012, the revitalization of the well-known nationalistic and populist rhetoric and action was nothing more than Ankara's anxious reaction to the Kurdish demands for an autonomous "Kurdistan" within Turkey. The events that followed this policy U-turn showed that Turkey simply cannot curb or defeat the Kurdish Autonomy Movement by military means alone. Dialog and understanding is the only way for the establishment of a truly united and secure Turkey. If the

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12 For these developments analytically see Stelgias Nikolaos 2013. *Türkiye'nin Milliyetçilikle İmtihanı* (Turkey Facing Nationalism), Khalkedon Publications, Istanbul.

peace process is to be continued the Turkish government must answer an essential question: What will be its last and final answer to the Kurdish demands for autonomy? Four months after the presidential election, Erdoğan and the government are still to decide the answer to this question, which will affect Turkey both in short and in the long-run.

But what will happen if AKP choose the nationalists and the conservatives as allies instead of the Kurds? We must bear in mind that the incorporation of the nationalist Turks, who until today strongly support the Kemalist opposition, is not certain. Having said that, we can assume that the Turkish government may not secure the support of some political groups of the Kemalist and nationalist opposition for three main reasons. Firstly, the opposition parties are united in their criticism against AKP's conservative and authoritarian tendencies. They believe that the proposed changes to the role of parliament and judiciary could move Turkey towards a more authoritarian direction<sup>13</sup>. Secondly, both local and presidential elections showed that AKP has long reached its top electoral limits. The results of both elections show that in future election AKP is unlikely to attract more opposition voters. Lastly and most importantly, since June 2013, Turkey is under the influence of the Gezi events, which show that AKP is facing the growing frustration of the younger generations and the bourgeois class, mainly living in the western provinces of the country:

"After more than a decade in power, Erdoğan stands accused of using his dominant position to pursue an agenda that is shaped by his own ideology and the beliefs of his conservative support base and increasingly ignores the concerns of those who do not share this lifestyle: almost fifty percent of the country (those who did not vote for the AKP in the 2011 parliamentary elections). Many Turks consider their lifestyle and freedom to be under attack, believing that an increasingly conservative agenda is creeping into every crevice of their lives, moulding Turkey in an irreversible manner. The new alcohol law and the stated goal of raising a "religious generation" represent two such examples"<sup>14</sup>.

We must point out that the Gezi mentality and dynamic was present in the last two elections, when the new electoral map show three separate and distinctive spheres of influence: The western provinces of the country, close to the Aegean Sea, which mainly support Kemalist and nationalist opposition parties, the Kurdish regions in the eastern provinces that support the Kurdish Autonomy Movement and the rest of the country that support AKP.

Kurds and the opposition parties are not the only factors that place limits on AKP's political hegemony. Another factor is the unpredictable developments in Turkey's economy, as well as its foreign policy issues. The Gezi events (October 2012) lead to political, social and economic turmoil in eastern Turkey. Two examples illustrate Turkey's vulnerability regarding sudden crises and up-side-downs (political, social or economic) at home or abroad, global or regional. During the Gezi

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13 Amani Aslan 2013. Turkey's Growing ..., Accessed 25 November 2014.

14 Paul Amanda & Seyrek Murat Deniz 2013. Gezi Park One Month On: What lies ahead?, European Policy Center, 27 June 2013, [http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub\\_3623\\_gezi\\_park\\_one\\_month\\_on\\_-\\_what\\_lies\\_ahead.pdf](http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_3623_gezi_park_one_month_on_-_what_lies_ahead.pdf), Accessed 25 November 2014.

events, Turkish economy felt the impact of these protests as the Istanbul Stock Exchange fell sharply. One and half year since the October 2012 events, another crisis (ISIS attack on Kobani), expanded rapidly inside Turkey.

## 4. Conclusion: Turkey's choice

Few months after the presidential elections, Turkey is about to make a decision of historic significance. In a period where AKP has reached its top electoral limits, its leadership has concluded that only a new constitution can boost its political dominance and, at the same time, serve the political aspirations of President Erdoğan. The adoption of a new constitution depends on the co-operation between the government and its new, if any, ally or allies. At this point, the party that has ruled Turkey for the last 12 years must answer an important question. Will the Kurds or other political forces (nationalists and conservatives) help AKP to establish a new political system that so desire? The answer to this question will determine major events in Turkey, namely whether Turkey should become a liberal or an authoritarian state.

If the government chooses to co-operate with the Kurds, their demand for an autonomous "Kurdistan" region will certainly come to dominate negotiations. In this case (the liberal approach), state decentralization could be based on the democratic examples of the Western democracies. It is certain that in their effort to transform Turkey into a federal state, AKP, President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Davutoğlu will face the strongest opposition not only by their own party base but also from the opposition parties. We shall keep in mind that at the time when this analysis was written, former AKP members along with various opposition groups were forming new political parties with right-wing and even nationalistic sentiments and ideas. The dialog between the Turkish government and the Kurdish Autonomous Movement has already produced a new momentum for the Turkish nationalists. It is more than certain that restraining the dynamic of this new momentum will be one of the top priorities for the government, which seems to seek the support of the Kurds.

If the government fails to curb this new momentum gathered around Turkish nationalists and, at the same time fails to reach an agreement with the Kurds, then it is likely that nationalistic and populist policy approaches will be undertaken by AKP. In this case, AKP will have no alternative but to discuss the nature of the new constitution with the opposition parties. If AKP wishes to see its electoral base expanding to conservative or nationalist Turks then it is AKP that will be forced to make concessions in regard to important aspects of the new constitution.

On the other hand if AKP fail to gain support at all, then Turkey might enter into a period of tensions and political instability. In this case, given its electoral dominance, AKP will continue governing Turkey on the basis of its majority in the current Turkish parliament. But this majority will not be enough for the implementation of Erdoğan's grand plan.

Finally, it should be pointed out that in the field of foreign policy and especially in the case of Cyprus and the Greek-Turkish relations as a whole, AKP has already unveiled some aspects of its policy: After his election, President Erdoğan repeated his commitment to Ankara's traditional political line over Cyprus. At the same time Prime Minister Davutoğlu made similar, nationalistic in rhetoric, statements about Cyprus. The last developments in Cyprus show that both Erdoğan and

AKP seem to choose the well-tested and well-known solution of nationalistic and populist course of action rather than a democratic and liberal stance. In other words, in an important issue as it is the Cyprus Problem, Ankara seems to prefer an unknown adventurism rather than a final settlement. Future political developments will show whether Ankara will make the same choice regarding its new and long-awaited political system.

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