

Turkey: Controversies, debates, and polemics in the AKP - Erdogan and discontent

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Even though the strong suspicions of fraud during the referendum on April 16, 2017 did not get much attention from the supporters of the AKP (the Justice and Development Party), the same cannot be said of the results, which were lower than all the forecasts. In fact, by comparison with previous elections, the bloc for “Yes” to the presidentialist project of Erdogan, composed of the AKP and the far-right MHP (Nationalist Action Party), fell by 10% from 61.5 per cent to 51.3 per cent. It thus had a very fragile majority, especially given the importance of the constitutional amendment, faced with a 48.7 per cent very determined not to give up, in spite of the disparity of its component parts. The victory of the “No” in big cities such as Ankara and Istanbul (which has an AKP mayor) and in the conservative-leaning constituencies only served to increase the uneasiness of the AKP supporters.

The need to explain these results and do something about them with a view to the coming regional, legislative and presidential elections in 2019, has been expressed by an entanglement and a superposition of various debates and polemics in the media and social networks. Two main positions have emerged from this multitude of controversies.

An implicit internal opposition

On one side we find the defenders of a more moderate line, who consider that the results of the referendum call for a revision of the policy of cultural-religious polarization, criminalization of the opposition and the hunt for traitors. They advocate a positive change in Turkey’s relations with West, accompanied by democratic measures internally, without of course abandoning the fight against those involved in the attempted coup d’état, while nevertheless criticizing the excesses of the repression of the Gullenists. So what is involved here is a vision of a return to the original ideas of the AKP’s “conservative-democratic” project. Among the defenders of this line we find all the sectors of the AKP which disagree with Erdogan’s authoritarian course. First of all, Islamists whom we could describe as “moderates”, like the former President of the Republic Abdullah Gül and the former Prime Minister Ahmet Davoglu. All the same, this term (“moderate”) must be used cautiously, taking into account the fact that they are certainly not opposed to the increasing number of references to religion, both in the sphere of civil society and in the functioning of the state apparatus. But they are opposed to the sharp repressive turn taken by Erdogan, to which, moreover, they contributed quite a lot, before being pushed aside “in a delicate way”. Among the defenders of this line we also find sectors of the traditional Turkish right who have up to now supported the AKP.

These electors hold to conservative-religious values, but are at the same time secular (that is to say, according to the well-known Turkish saying, those “who pray on Fridays, but also drink their raki”) no longer feel comfortable with Erdogan’s project. These two sectors, which can of course overlap, are nostalgic for the first period of the AKP (from 2003 to 2011, or even 2013 for some of them), when values other than the sultanate of Erdogan were dominant, or at least supposed to be. And it was, according to them, democratic values in the sense that the representation of religious Muslims and the visibility of Islamic references in the public sphere were a question of democracy, in opposition to the authoritarian secularism of Kemalist origin of the autocratic nature. At the same time, of course, as maintaining the course towards joining the European Union.

More radical Islamists are also to be found among the discontented. We should remember that various more or less fundamentalist Islamist currents had called for a No vote during the referendum. Especially, the commitment to the No vote of the Saadet Partisi (Party of Happiness), which represents the historic Milli Görüş (National Opinion) current from which the AKP came – and which was much more religious than the party – countered the attempt of Erdogan to identify the objective of the referendum with a religious cause. But it is precisely the effacement of the Islamic cause before the single goal of the ascendancy of Erdogan that pushed various Islamists into the camp of the opposition.

The devoted ones

In the opposite camp we find the reisçi (pronounced «rayischi») as they call themselves, that is, the fervent defenders of the Reis, the Captain. It is above all the victory of Erdogan and of the “national will” that they stress, in the face of all the conspiracies engineered by the Western powers – from the revolt of Gezi Park (in May-June 2013), with thousands of arrests, with many people injured, even killed, a movement which spread to the main cities, to the 2013 anti-corruption operations, the PKK’s “terrorist” actions and the attempted coup d’état.

They are nevertheless conscious of the drop in their vote, but they interpret it through an analytical framework based once again on the concept of treason. A young reisçi who is well known on social media and close to the party apparatus, whom I met just a few days after the referendum, told me: “The party did not work. The hidden partisans of “No”, like the people around Davutoglu and Gül, are still influential in the party. These groups must be defeated. As well as the followers of Gülen. They say that 120 MPs downloaded Bylock - the communication application the members of the Gülen fraternity. The purges have not yet targeted members of the party. We are still waiting for an anti-putschist operation against the politicians”.

These two important figures of the party, Gül and Davutoglu, represent in the eyes of the reisçi the enemy who is close by, capable of being in contact with Fethullah Gülen. The fact that Gül declined the invitation of Erdogan to take part in a rally for the “Yes” during the campaign and that Davutoglu, although he did not refuse, made no call in his speech for a “Yes” vote, represents in their eyes evidence of the conspiracy.

According to the Marxist political analyst Dogan Cetinkaya, who follows closely the Islamic movement, this vision is based on the belief in a total identification with Erdogan: “For the reisçi, there must be no deviation from the path of Erdogan: anything else is considered to be giving aid to traitors. So it is necessary to support his discourse and his actions, which can generally change orientation in the space of a few weeks, indeed a few days. The contradictions are not a problem, the important thing is the unquestioning loyalty”. The return of Erdogan to the presidency of the party on May 21, 2017, following the constitutional referendum which abolished the obligation for the

President of the Republic to be independent, is for Cetinkaya a logical consequence of Erdoganism: there is no longer any party, in the strict sense of the term, outside of Erdogan. No debate between opposing positions, no objection to the line decided by the Reis is possible. The only way of influencing the chief is through personal relations established with him. And in this way we can witness a race to see who will be the most reisçi, with the aim of discrediting competitors at the slightest sign of a lack of loyalty and consolidating one's place in the sphere of power".

Reisçi vs Islamists?

Erdogan's close circle, especially after the eviction of Gül, of well-known founding members of the party (such as Bulent Arinc), and then Davutoglu, is increasingly composed of - relatively - young journalists, economists, men and women of secular political origins, who had not previously been in any party. Their ideological positions are to say the least hazy. For them identifying with Erdogan has become in itself a political cause. This is of course a deliberate choice on the part of the Reis, who no longer wants to be encumbered by political personalities who have their own profile and who might be somewhat at variance with his opinions. However, the confidence with which these careerists speak in Erdogan's name, criminalizing any deviation, especially after the attempted coup d'état, has led to many protests on the part of conservative-religious sectors, and in particular longtime party members.

Thus, the intervention of the pseudo-journalist Cem Kucuk during a televised broadcast several days after the referendum sparked off a controversy that crystallized all the opposition currents. Kucuk is a columnist and commentator, whose main specialty is to call publicly for the dismissal, the lynching by the media or even the arrest of dissident journalists, intellectuals and politicians. This time he took on the Islamists, in particular the foundation which organized the flotilla in support of Gaza - around 700 people on the ship Mavi Marmara - which was attacked by the State of Israel in May 2010, causing the death of nine volunteers: "It is time for the ACP to separate itself from the radical Islamists, the crazy people on the Mavi Marmara, absurdly opposed to Israel, to the West, to everything. I have a feeling that that is what Mr. Tayyip (Erdogan) is going to do". Kucuk's impertinence thus led to a vast polemic that was perceived by public opinion as a settlement of accounts between reisçi and Islamists.

The articles by Ahmet Tasgetiren, longtime Islamist columnist, give a good idea of the state of mind of the "old-timers", of the defenders of the Islamic cause. Tasgetiren jokes in one of his articles about "the war drums of an anti-Islamist war, coming from a group of which we know neither the origins nor who is a member of it. Enough of these creatures who come out from behind walls and spread their mud every day. The split between Islamists and non-Islamists will destroy the AKP (...). It is an operation against Erdogan and the AKP (...). Some people want to make the aims and the existence of the AKP explode, that is my analysis". (Star, April 27, 2017).

I met Cihangir Islam, a dissident Muslim intellectual, after the end of the fast, in a little pizza restaurant in Taksim, to ask him about this so-called debate between reisçi and Islamists. Islam was in the 1980s one of the close advisers of the late Necmettin Erbakan, historic figure of Turkish institutional Islam and leader of Milli Gurus. The human rights association with a strong Muslim influence, Mazlum-Der, which Cihangir Islam founded in the same decade, was recently confiscated by the AKP through a change in its leadership. The Has, a party founded in 2010, influenced by religion and advocating democracy and social justice, to which Islam contributed, was reduced to nothing by its leadership being taken over by the AKP. Cihangir Islam, who is a professor of surgery, was recently dismissed from his post at the university by a decree of Erdogan, because he signed a petition in favour of freedom of expression, in support of university staff who had signed the peace

petition.

"This is the fourth time that I have been expelled from the university, he said. The three previous times were in the 1990s because of my activities in favour of human rights and mainly the right to wear the veil. And the fourth time, today under Erdogan: back then we could lodge an appeal, but not today." Erdogan's regime represents in his opinion a Machiavellian and Bonapartist administration. "The AKP is not an Islamist, party, it is independent of any political values and only wants to stay in power. The consolidation around the chief has become so primordial that the expression of loyalty is based on an oath to be repeated every day, it has almost become an obligation. Legitimacy comes from the Reis. That is why even the criticisms of those who call themselves Islamists do not target Erdogan, but those around him. And that is why the Islamists have nothing to do in this party, because even above the prophet there is a principle, an axiom if you like, beyond the individual will." A specialist in Turkish Islamic brotherhoods and columnist for the daily Cumhuriyet (several of whose journalists and editors are in prison) Professor Tayfun Atay shares this view: "The AKP was never Islamist, on the contrary it was when its founders bid farewell to Islamism that the AKP was born, thus paving the way for post-Islamism", he told me.. Playing on words, Atay clarified his point of view: "It is not a religious party (dindar), but a religious fraud (dinbaz), that is to say that it mobilizes religion in view of its secular, material interests. Islamic rhetoric is preserved and even accentuated, but ultimately what lies beneath is a halal capitalism."

According to him, the case of the brotherhoods is a good demonstration of this transformation: "Religious sects and brotherhoods are today all foundations, holdings that manage media organs, hospitals, Koran lessons, supermarkets, various financial companies. It was Erdogan who opened this path for them and today they are subject to him". Regarding the reisçi, Tayfun Atay believes that "the cult of personality based on Erdogan's charisma and the patronage structure of the party has led to the emergence of all these supporters of the Reis, these trolls, this lumpen-intelligentsia which takes on the functions of a hangman with regard to the opposition and especially against the nearest dissidents. It is no longer post-Islamism, but now a post-mortem Islamism that they represent".

President Erdogan tried to put an end to the polemic at the beginning of May 2017, addressing criticisms to both sides: "It is completely wrong to make a division between those who are Islamists and those who are not, within political activity. [In the party] we are not trying to find disciples for a dervish lodge." He did not, however, forget to address the dissidents: "Some people supported the party of which I am the founder. But they forked. They got off the train. We have witnessed unacceptable approaches in recent times. This is a deviation from the right path".

A tired party

Although the intensity of the controversy actually subsided after the intervention of the Reis, discontent continued to accumulate during the summer and new debates rebounded along the same dividing lines. At the end of May, President Erdogan finally announced his vision of the reasons for the fall in votes in the referendum: his party was hit by "metal fatigue". Conscious of the fact that the elections of 2019 will bring a major risk of a loss of power at all levels, the Reis has been calling since then, on every occasion, for a "profound change" of the party cadres, a renewal of the apparatus that would bring forward young people and women. If Erdogan asked those who felt weary to pass the baton, this call was perceived, as it should be, as the announcement of forthcoming purges to remove the "proxy-Gülenists", those who would agitate in the name of the brotherhood (of the "Fethullahist terrorist organization") within the party.

The daily *Karar*, which regroups the main dissidents of the AKP and is suspected by the reisçis to be remotely controlled by Davutoglu (his former adviser, the Armenian liberal intellectual Etyen Mahcupyan, regularly writes columns) reacted to this explanation with “fatigue”, while not taking a position directly against the Reis. A long-time journalist and former AKP MP (and also a poet), Mehmet Ocaktan, criticized this approach by putting it in perspective: “If the president felt the need to intervene directly, he must have seen that the party was perceived as tired in the eyes of society. But the main question is whether this is only a problem of fatigue of the apparatus, or is it the loss of a clear discourse on the universal standards of freedom, democracy and change that the AKP had declared to society, based on its founding philosophy. “(*Karar*, August 18, 2017) According to Ocaktan the party must, in parallel with the initiative of renovation, conduct a reflection on the causes of its turning in on itself and its attitude “to practically explain everything through the concepts of homeland-nation/foreign enemy” (*Karar*, August 21, 2017).

Much more explicitly, Hakan Albayrak, another columnist for *Karar*, says that the party needs to find a heterogeneity “that would not succumb under the weight of the charisma of a leader”. He calls on “party elders, MPs, ministers and ex-ministers to express their reactions publicly”: “If there is no point in talking behind closed doors, there remains no other solution than to discuss in front of public opinion, to try to create social pressure.” (*Karar*, September 14, 2017)

However, renewal is progressing at a snail’s pace for the moment. Because Erdogan is well aware that although he needs a party that is completely loyal to him, a major clean-out also carries the risk of offending many of his supporters, whether in the apparatus or at the level of his electoral base. Moreover, although there is no doubt, for the moment, about the loyalty of the reisçi careerists, as Professor Atay underlines, “we know very well that they will be the first to leave him when the time comes. And Erdogan is aware of that too.”

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P.S.

* Translation IVP:

<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5224>