

Abdullah Gül's broad perspective

PROFILE OF ABDULLAH GÜL

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY

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President Abdullah Gül takes a wide-lens view of the world. He is not only overseeing a transition to democracy at home, but wants peace and security for the wider region around Turkey, and believes Ankara is well placed as a member of the G20 and NATO to make it happen. He is one of the architects of Turkey's new foreign policy, which is based on zero problems with its neighbours, and the exercise of soft power.

Prime Minister in the first Justice and Development (AK) Party government – which came to power in a landslide general election on 3rd November 2002 – Gül became President in August 2007. Since then, Turkey has consolidated democracy at home as well as overcoming long-standing rifts with its neighbours, signing agreements with Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Armenia. He has also attempted mediation between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as overseeing the talks between Syria and Israel in 2007-08.

Few countries in the world have changed as dramatically as Turkey over the last decade, and President Gül is among the most intriguing new political leaders to emerge. His election as President makes him the first politician with an Islamist background to become head of state since the Turkish Republic was established in 1923 by Kemal Atatürk.

When first elected, he was portrayed as part of a new Islamic wave that was challenging the entrenched secular elite. He is a practising Muslim who married his wife when she was 15; she wears the headscarf that some secular Turks consider a badge of reactionary Islam. Yet he and his closest political ally, the Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, have led a political revolution that has brought Turkey closer to democracy than any regime in the modern state's 87-year history. Secularist parties boycotted a parliamentary vote on Mr Gül's candidacy in April 2007, blocking his presidential bid and creating political deadlock.

The nomination of Mr Gül to the presidency sparked Turkey's most serious political crisis in a decade, with hundreds of thousands of protesters rallying in the big cities in support of secularism. In July of that year, the ruling AK Party, which Mr Gül helped found, decided to re-nominate him for the post, arguing that the sweeping general election victory it had just won gave it the mandate to do so. Despite his political background, Gül has earned a worldwide reputation as

a moderate, conservative, reform-minded and pro-EU politician, particularly during his time as the AK Party's Government's foreign minister.

In the Turkish parliamentary system, policies are defined and carried out by the government, but the President also has significant power over decisions. He or she must approve every law and formal decision emerging from the parliament, as well as the appointments of key officials, including generals, governors, ambassadors, and university rectors.

Secularists feared Abdullah Gül as president would promote Islamist candidates to key state institutions, gradually undermining secularism, but those fears have proved unfounded. Mr Gül has wrong-footed those who opposed him in the April elections by demonstrating his commitment to Turkey's secular constitution. "The Constitution will be my guide," Mr Gül said during the announcement of his second bid to become Turkey's new president. "The Republic of Turkey is a democratic, secular and social state based on the rule of law. My primary objective will be to protect and further strengthen these principles."

President Gül's experience of power has changed his approach. During the early 1990s, he was highly critical of Turkey's Western orientation and was against its possible membership of the European Union. He has since shown that Turkey can play a decisive role in bridging the chasm that separates the West from more turbulent regions. His country's efforts to join the European Union, he says, are its "main agenda".

Mr Gül knows that Turkey is well poised to play a mediating role in regional conflicts where there are strong ties with Turkish speakers. That means the Balkans, the Caucasus, Russia, Cyprus, and the Middle East. His vision of peace and security for all means more than mediation; it means "high-level political dialogue, and economic interdependency. I wish to see Turkey as an island where the European standard of democracy is being fulfilled and the free market economy is functioning very well," he has said. "This will be a real gift to the region, to the world, for peace. And this Turkey will be a source of inspiration for so many. As we are transforming ourselves in that direction, we will not forget our natural links and relationships and advantages with other countries – whether Muslim, Central Asian, in the Caucasus, or the Middle East. Turkey is having a positive impact on

Opposite:
Abdullah Gül,
President of the
Republic of Turkey

them, spreading the values of democracy, freedom, rule of law. Also, the economic changes here are admired. Maybe that is the indirect influence of this country.”

A crucial moment

This is a crucial moment in Turkey’s history, as it sends its military – the self-proclaimed guardians of the country’s secular status – back to the barracks, now that President Gül has appointed new chiefs of staff. At the same time, flourishing under greater freedom, the media has played a part in exposing the dark secrets of the shadowy elements within the military (which toppled four governments between 1960-98) and that are accused of coup attempts against the AKP government. These include a plot to assassinate the Deputy Prime Minister, Bülent Arinç, on 19th December 2009.

As the shades are lifted from Turkey’s recent history, and the country demilitarises, the way is now open to real democratisation, says President Gül. Much needs to be done, including constitutional and other reforms. But the pace of change is undeniable; new elites are emerging, with a growing, vibrant middle class. The energy is echoed abroad. Rising above a core divide over identity and internal direction, Turks can agree on a foreign policy that is coherent and promises economic gain and security, and expresses a clear sense of how Turkey sees itself in the world.

In recent years, a vibrantly capitalist Turkey has bolstered its regional trade to great effect, looking for markets not just in the Middle East but also in old enemies such as Armenia. Lifting visa requirements with Syria, for instance, has already been a boon to businessmen in southern Turkey. Russia is now the country’s largest trading partner, and the Wall Street Journal reports that Turkey’s trade with Sudan has tripled since 2006. Iran, meanwhile, is a major source of cheap natural gas, keeping Turkey’s economy growing. Ankara believes that its good relations with Tehran make it the ideal mediator in the row over Iran’s nuclear capability.

On the question of EU membership, Turkey is acutely aware that securing a place in the 27-member bloc is crucial to its own long-term economic success. Again, reflecting President Gül’s wide-lens outlook, Ankara has promoted its EU

candidacy by arguing that it will help expand Europe’s influence in the Middle East. President Gül points out that Turkey will be more useful to its allies if it is also on good terms with its allies’ enemies. Being a bridge between East and West, he says, requires having a footing in the East as well.

Some Turks worry that the AKP government is trying to balance too many interests and is in danger of overstating its soft power potential. Perhaps their concerns miss the point, as President Gül pointed out recently: “How foreign policy is conducted is as important as the end results. We used to be peripheral to all our neighbours. Now you can’t discuss many regions without talking about Turkey.”

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