

A quiet revolution in Turkey

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Turkey is sweeping away the old order at a speed unimaginable only a few years ago. Under the leadership of Turkey's current president Abdullah Gül, the once-mighty military is giving way to civilian control over policy and governance. It seems that gone are the days when the Turkish military – the self-appointed guardians of secularism and territorial unity – could challenge civilian rulers at will.

Nothing demonstrates the change of the guard more than the recent "Ergenekon" indictments against an alleged shadowy group of right-wing nationalists who, according to the government, are engaged in a grand conspiracy to overthrow the political establishment. This extraordinarily complex case has embroiled the elites of the ancien regime, ranging from military commanders to journalists and academics.

This transformation is taking place against a backdrop of a tortuously slow accession process for Turkey into the European Union (EU). In 2005, Turkey commenced negotiations to achieve a lifelong dream to become a member of the club of secular European democracies. Right from the start, the path was strewn with obstacles and deep unease across Europe. French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel called for "privileged partnership" as an alternative to EU membership. Among the objections regularly cited by Turkey-sceptics are the country's population size, cultural distinctiveness, human rights record, the Cyprus dispute and its primarily Asian geography (only a tiny strip of Turkey is located in the European hinterland).

Turkey's desire to embrace Europe spurred the present Turkish government led by the Justice and Development Party (JDP) to enact extensive EU-style political and economic reforms in its early years. It abolished security courts, expanded the linguistic and cultural rights of Kurds, eased the restrictions on non-Muslim minority foundations and downgraded the National Security Council composed of military and political leaders from a rule-making to a consultative body. Most dramatically, the government overturned a half-century of a stolid Turkish politicking on Cyprus by embracing a United Nations-sponsored comprehensive peace agreement in 2004, of which then-foreign minister Abdullah Gül was a key architect. Ultimately, this ambitious effort was resoundingly defeated by Greek Cypriots while receiving the broad support of Turkish Cypriots in

simultaneous referendums.

Although the EU accession process is currently comatose, the change momentum is still continuing, driven mostly by internal dynamics. Turkey's public in a 60-40 split approved a package of highly contentious constitutional amendments rescinding the legal immunity for the 1980 military coup plotters and enlarging executive involvement in the appointment of prosecutors and judges. That is likely to lead to a wider diversity of academic and socio-cultural backgrounds in the judiciary.

Political upheaval normally accompanies economic restructuring, and this is no more true than in Turkey. After suffering a major financial and economic meltdown in 2001, the JDP government and its predecessor introduced a series of radical economic measures to clean up the corruption-ridden banking system, open the telecommunication and energy sectors to competition and implement a massive privatisation programme. Aided by a benign global economic environment, Turkey enjoyed rapid growth rates of 8 per cent, annual Foreign Investments of US\$20 billion and a big jump in exports, especially to the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and Russia.

Turkey was one of the few countries to escape relatively unscathed during the 2008-09 international financial crisis. Turkey is defying its conventional wisdom as a by-word for profligate spending and hyper-inflation. Nowadays the watchwords are fiscal consolidation, monetary stability and financial prudence. Despite the crisis, Turkey's debt burden is lower than most EU countries, its inflation is in single digits and interest rates are at historic lows. Being the seventeenth largest economy in the world and sixth in Europe, Turkey is a member of the prestigious G-20 group of industrialised economies.

Turkey's metamorphosis is expected to gather pace in the next few years as the rising socially conservative Anatolian middle classes continue to consolidate political and economic power. After the general elections in 2011, the immediate challenge will be the promulgation of a new civilian constitution to replace the present text drafted at the highpoint of military influence in 1982. This will constitute another turning point in strengthening the public accountability of civilian politicians. As president, Abdullah Gül will be a powerful voice in the next phase of lively constitutional and economic debates in Turkey. ■