

Leading positive change

PROFILE OF ABDULLAH GÜL

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY

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One year ago, when President Abdullah Gül last visited the United Kingdom, exercising Turkey's "zero problems" foreign policy was already a complicated and delicate business. After becoming head of state in August 2007, Mr. Gül, a former foreign minister, took a number of regional foreign policy initiatives, overcoming long-standing rifts with Turkey's neighbours by signing agreements with Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Armenia. He had also put himself forward as a mediator in peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians and had overseen negotiations between Israel and Syria. At the same time there was mounting tension with Israel over the raid on the Gaza flotilla – which would see Ankara expel the Israeli ambassador in September of this year – not to mention the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with the mounting tension between Iran and Europe and the United States. Then this spring began the momentous changes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria.

As 2011 comes to an end, President Gül is one of the most popular figures in the Middle East, envisioning a new order there and having positioned himself firmly on the side of democracy in the Arab revolts and revolutions. In an Arab world where the United States sometimes seems in retreat, Europe increasingly concerned with its own problems, and where powers like Israel and Iran have been wrong-footed, President Gül offers a vision for what may emerge from turmoil across two continents that has upended decades of assumptions.

In September, President Gül sent his Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, where he was received as the proudly Muslim leader of a democratic and prosperous country that has come convincingly out on the side of change and in defense of Palestinian rights.

The talk now is of an axis between Egypt and Turkey, two of the region's most populous and militarily powerful nations, which would underpin a new order in the region. At the same time, President Gül believes that as its economic motor, Turkey has the potential to help create a regional bloc along the lines of the EU.

Meanwhile, relations remain good with the United States, even if American officials privately chide what they see as Mr. Erdoğan's overconfidence. Some

Turkish officials worry that the crisis with Israel will end up hurting the relationship with Washington; other observers believe that in the longer term, Turkey could even end up supplanting Israel as the partner of the United States in the Middle East.

Leading change

Few countries in the world have changed as dramatically as Turkey over the last decade, and President Gül, a political outsider, has played a key role in leading that change. He is the first politician with an Islamist background to become head of state since the Turkish Republic was established in 1923 by Kemal Ataturk.

When first elected, he was seen as part of an Islamic movement that was challenging the entrenched secular and military elite. He is a practicing Muslim who married his wife when she was 15; she wears the headscarf that some non-religious Turks consider a badge of reactionary Islam. Yet he and his closest political ally, Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, have led a political revolution that has brought Turkey closer to democracy than any government in the modern state's history.

Despite his political background, Mr 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 initially feared that as President Mr Gül would promote Islamist candidates to key state institutions, gradually undermining secularism. But those fears have proved unfounded. In fact the very opposite has happened: President Gül has pushed for greater change to strengthen the rule of law. In September of 2010, Turks voted in a referendum on constitutional changes to raise democratic standards and further erode the powers of the country's once omnipotent generals.

Some 58 per cent of voters approved the government's proposed changes to the Constitution,

Opposite:
HE Abdullah Gül,
President of the
Republic of Turkey

which was written by the army after it seized power in 1980. The vote was seen as a clear signal of continued support for Prime Minister Erdoğan and the President Abdullah Gül.

Similarly, the EU has welcomed the constitutional changes, which, among other things, make it possible from now on for coup plotters to be tried in civilian courts. The package includes measures to bar gender discrimination, bolster civil liberties, and protect personal privacy. The core of the package is a major overhaul of the judiciary. This gives the President and Parliament greater say over the appointments of senior judges and prosecutors, and expands the size of the constitutional court and that of the judicial body in charge of appointments.

But the longer-term goal is the drafting of a new, civilian Constitution. Modern Turkey is of course already governed by the rule of law, yet it is clear that a civilian democracy would further benefit from having a civilian inspired constitution, too. It is a logical consequence of the maturing of this successful nation-state and very successful functioning market economy.

What is promising in this regard is that the current Government understands that although his administration enjoys enormous support within the electorate, the new Constitution must reflect the country's diversity, "diversity" interpreted as including the President's political opponents, too.

What is even more promising is that the Government aims at involving civil society and not just legal experts or deputies during the final round of debates. Turkey's new constitution aims to be a mirror image of the above-mentioned diversity, allowing for all forms of democratic aspirations and lifestyles to flourish while at the same time summing up the country's irrevocable legal norms and standards.

Changing priorities

President Gül's experience of power has changed his priorities. 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 said last year. "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 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." **F**

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