





Policy Brief


Reflection on the potential emergence of a new party in Turkey and what it means to the EU

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With the potential emergence of a new political party in Turkey resulting from the fragmentation of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), the current political set-up in Turkey might turn into one where President Erdogan's governing AK Party loses its parliamentary majority in the next elections.

In that respect, the two pioneering faces of this likely efflorescent party, namely Ali Babacan and Abdullah Gül, might provide an alternative to Turkish constituents who are discontent with the incumbent government. This fragmentation of AK Party coupled with the rising of new critical voices might eventually start the end of the longstanding ruling by President Erdogan, trigger a new era for Turkey and subsequently its relations with the European Union (EU).

Introduction

In July 2019, the rumours that had been running for quite some time became true: Ali Babacan left the Justice and Development Party, over "deep differences" relating the party's direction.¹ However, Ali Babacan did not leave silently like the former Prime Minister Davutoglu did in 2016, but instead the Turkish politician used his resignation as a platform to cautiously speak to the Turkish electorate in a rather unexpected way, about the need for a change in Turkish politics.

The emergence of a new political party is expected from this rupture within the AK Party. Alongside with the former President of the Turkish Republic, Abdullah Gül, Ali Babacan's potential new party might very well subtract public support from AK Party, by bringing with him voters who are resentful towards the economic situation of the country and who still consider him as Turkey's prominent economic saviour of the last decade. However, multiple pundits underlined that Ali Babacan is very cautious about who will join his new party since he does not prefer the latter to be seen as a continuation of the governing AK Party.

Who are Ali Babacan and Abdullah Gül?

In 2001, Ali Babacan became one of the seventy-two co-founders of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), and a year after with the party's first election victory he served as the Minister of State in charge of Economic Affairs.

Ali Babacan was then appointed as the first ever Chief Negotiator in Turkey's accession talks with the EU, a role he took on until the beginning of 2009. In 2007, he also served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs under the Presidency of Abdullah Gül. And from 2009 to 2015 he served as Deputy Prime Minister for Economic and Financial Affairs.² He is highly renowned for being the architect of Turkey's economic boom in the AK Party's early years in power. Giving the fact that since 2015 Ali Babacan has not held any cabinet position that drives him away from almost all the draconian decisions of the past several years taken under Erdogan Administration, for many this is going to

¹ <https://ahvalnews.com/ali-babacan/ali-babacan-strikes-out-his-own-path-turkey#>

² See above

play in favour of Ali Babacan when attracting electorate who are disgruntled with the latest policies of the government.

Although Ali Babacan is known for his successful economic policies, it is also important to acknowledge the challenges that Ali Babacan might face when planning to attract voters from all centre-parties, including the AK Party. On the one hand, Ali Babacan needs to attract AK Party voters but, as previously mentioned, he does not want his new party to be seen as an offshoot of the governing establishment.

On the other hand, he needs to attract also voters from all the other centre-parties, some of whose constituency link Ali Babacan to AK Party directly and hold him responsible for the actions carried out by the government. This is to emphasize that Ali Babacan needs to find a middle ground that will not jeopardize neither side of the electoral base that he would like to attract to his new political party, which might become one of the biggest challenges faced by him and his new political party.

Having said that, Ali Babacan is also perceived in Brussels and in many EU capitals as a pro-European politician who has an established record when it comes to Turkey's EU accession negotiations. In an interview in 2008, Ali Babacan announced that Turkey's "ultimate target would be aligning its constitution with the criteria of the European Union".³ As a matter of fact, the period between 2000 and 2005, turned out to be the most reformatory one in the history of EU-Turkey relations. Furthermore, some of the most pivotal and needed reforms were adopted during the mandate of Ali Babacan as the Chief Negotiator to the EU.⁴

With that said, one also needs to acknowledge the fact that Ali Babacan served while Abdullah Gül was the incumbent President of the Turkish Republic, and since then the two have gotten closer. Abdullah Gül was also one of the founders of the AK Party back in 2001 and served as Prime-Minister between 2002 and 2003, while Erdogan was legally precluded from holding public offices due to his 1998 conviction for inciting religious hatred.⁵ In 2003 Abdullah Gül became the Foreign Minister in the government led by the then Prime Minister Erdogan and gained notoriety for his massive contribution to Turkey's advancement towards EU integration.⁶ He then served as President from 2007 to 2014 and since then he has not held any official position.

These two former allies of President Erdogan became cautiously-vocal critics of the Turkish President especially since the changes in the Constitution that allowed the later to accumulate executive powers, when the shift to a presidential system took place. They might now join forces in this new political party and oppose Turkey's strongman.

³ <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-ali-babacan-0>

⁴ Özbudun, E. (2011). Fundamental Rights and Liberties. In E. Özbudun, *The Constitutional System of Turkey: 1876 to Present* (1 ed., pp. 39-57). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan US.

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/22/world/istanbul-mayor-an-islamist-is-given-10-month-jail-term.html>

⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abdullah-Gul>

Why does this matter? Because, It can represent change

Although several reforms were made, Turkey's accession started to slow down with the second and subsequent term of the AK Party. In that regard, the very first symptoms of authoritarian tendencies under the then PM Erdogan can be traced back to the Gezi Park protests in 2013. Since then, there has been an observable backslide in democracy, rule of law and human rights in Turkey, that escalated in the aftermath of the attempted coup, which took place on 15th July 2016.

The increasing lack of freedom of speech that has put large numbers of journalists and scholars in jail in the past few years, the Constitutional changes that have transformed Turkey into a system of "competitive authoritarianism",⁷ thousands of violations of human rights and the overall backsliding in democracy, have been the main concerns expressed by the European Union regarding Turkey over the past years, which partly explain the rocky trajectory of Turkey's accession negotiations.⁸

More precisely, President Erdogan has been highly criticized for being responsible for Turkey's estrangement from European values and objectives, to which Turkey has been and still is officially tied via the accession process. The state of emergency declared by Erdogan's Administration in the aftermath of the attempted coup of July 2015, that resulted in thousands of people - from journalists, scholars, judges and business people, to prosecutors and civil society representatives, amongst others - being detained and arrested without any due process, also drove Turkey and the EU further away. The EU has voiced its concerns several times regarding the prolonged state of emergency that lasted for more than two years and especially the curtailing of human rights under it,⁹ and further criticism from the EU was addressed regarding the constitutional changes that turned Turkey into a presidential system that lacks an effective checks-and-balances structure.¹⁰

Giving the fact that this very negative political atmosphere has been overshadowing EU-Turkey relations for a long time and that the governing AK Party has already lost a meaningful portion of its popular support, the outcome of the latest local elections has become also a massive hit to the governing party and has facilitated the creation of a new political party in Turkish politics that can represent an alternative to the ruling party. The fact that the main opposition Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi - CHP) has been recently strengthened by its victory in the latest local elections both in Ankara and Istanbul, the two biggest cities hitherto governed by mayors affiliated with AK Party, the hope and the likelihood of a new alternative to the AK Party increased tremendously.

⁷ For more about the concept of "competitive authoritarianism" see: Özbudun, E. (2014, December). Competitive Authoritarianism. *Turkish Review*, 4(6), pp. 659-663. Retrieved from Turkish Review; Castaldo, A. (2018, December 06). Populism and competitive authoritarianism in Turkey. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 18, pp. 467-487; Esen, B., & Gumuscu, S. (2016, February 19). Rising competitive authoritarianism in Turkey. *Third World Quarterly*, 37(9), pp. 1581-1606;

⁸ <https://www.dw.com/en/turkish-democracy-backsliding-eu-says-in-membership-report/a-48965952>

⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/eu-warns-curtailing-rights-turkey-state-emergency-180417170554386.html>

¹⁰ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0200_EN.html

Alongside the loss of major cities in the recent local elections, the discontent of the Turkish electorate with the ongoing economic recession seems to be another major factor behind the current electoral eagerness to support new political actors in Turkish politics.

Against this backdrop, the aforementioned new party might come off as an alternative worthy of attention. The complementary duo of Babacan and Gül brings the presage of a more moderate view - that has had no space in AK Party for quite some time now - with the figure of Abdullah Gül; and the presage of economic recovery and growth with the figure of Ali Babacan, a duo that the Turkish people have been increasingly searching for.

That being said, Abdullah Gül has already declared that he will not hold any official position even when the party will be fully established, thus hinting at his preference to assume the role of a mentor given his vast experience in Turkish politics. It is expected that Ali Babacan's party will aim at ending the current presidential system, that was established by President Erdogan, and revive Prime Ministry under the long-standing Turkish parliamentary system. In such a scenario, it might be plausible to consider Ali Babacan assuming the role of the PM and Gül that of President, should the new party gain larger public support.

According to recent polls, if Ali Babacan's potential new party is to be established, it would not have a problem to surpass the 10 percent threshold mandatory to be represented in the Turkish Parliament in future national elections.¹¹ Moreover, according to the same poll, about 30 percent of the surveyed persons claimed they wanted a new party to support in opposition to the AK Party.

Given that the AK Party seems to be losing some of its strength lately, if the new party of Babacan and Gül is to be established by September 2019, we might observe snap elections in Turkey in the first part of 2020 in which it is conceivable that the AK Party led by President Erdogan might lose its majority in the parliament.

An eventual step closer to the EU?

Having held the post of Chief Negotiator to the EU and later that of Minister of Foreign Affairs between 2005 and 2009, one can argue that Ali Babacan knows what is at stake when talking about accession to the Union. Under AK Party's first mandate, there was a rather serious process of reforms in Turkey in order to meet the conditions required by the accession process, as was previously mentioned.

Although the EU and Turkey have massively drifted away in the past few years, Ali Babacan appears to have the will to revive EU-Turkey relations. In that respect, Ali Babacan pledges to revitalize EU-Turkey relations as well as emphasises the importance of rule of law and the significance of institutions¹², characteristics that, in theory, could eventually lead to a more politically stable Turkey and thus a steadier neighbour to the European Union.

¹¹ <https://ipa.news/2019/07/10/poll-shows-babacans-breakaway-party-can-get-as-much-as-18-percent-of-votes-in-an-election/>

¹² <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-local-elections/turkeys-akp-faces-looming-threat-splinter-parties>

After resigning from the AK Party, Ali Babacan has already mentioned the necessity for a “new vision” for Turkey, the “historic need” he and his friends felt towards accomplishing it, and further stated in his resignation letter¹³ that their principles were those of “human rights, freedoms, advanced democracy and the rule of law”, which are the core issues the EU has been criticising Erdogan Administration for.¹⁴ Such statements, alongside Ali Babacan’s prior record as a pro-European politician, paint a picture of possible change in Turkey’s engagements with the European Union.

What is Next?

If the party is to be established, it is important to see who will further join it and how will President Erdogan see the mounting opposition, especially coming from his former colleagues. It is furthermore important to observe how the Turkish electorate will respond to the said new party, especially the traditionally AK Party’s electorate. Accordingly, and in the case of a snap election in the first part of 2020, parliamentary majority might be lost by the AK Party, which could be seen as the start of a fresh rearranging of Turkish politics.

Both parliamentary and presidential elections are scheduled for 2023 and President Erdogan underlined that there will be no snap elections, which makes the upcoming months critical and potentially decisive with regard to the future political spectrum and climate of the country.

New voices are rising, and these voices seem to have the strength to affect AK Party’s leadership. It is essential to underline that these changes seem to have a chance to mainly affect and influence the center-right oriented electorate in Turkey; nonetheless these changes do have a potential to challenge President Erdogan’s leadership and that alone deserves an attentive eye in the months to follow.

¹³ <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/plusreklam/reklamarkapali>

¹⁴ <https://www.ft.com/content/14806d84-a179-11e9-974c-ad1c6ab5efd1>

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