

In Brief: Ahmet Davutoğlu's almost 21-months as Turkey's premier and as the governing AKParty's chairman came to an end on May 22, 2016. Though what has taken place has been officially framed as a resignation, his speeches and the way this resignation has occurred suggest that it was more a forced removal than a willful resignation. For the time being, this does not mean the end of Davutoğlu's political journey. Instead, he seems to be situating himself as a natural alternative from within (the AKParty). Nevertheless, this resignation has provided President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan with a new opportunity to redesign the party and cabinet in his own image. As a result, Erdoğan's grip over both party and cabinet is firmer now than was the case during Davutoğlu's premiership.

What Does Davutoğlu's Departure Mean for the AKParty and Turkey at Large?

by Galip Dalay

"Unusual" is no longer a sufficient word to describe the nature of political developments in Turkey. The AKParty has changed its chairman along with a major reshuffle of the composition of the party's main decision-making bodies. Moreover, the new party chairman, who automatically became the new premier, has put in place a new government with significant changes to the cabinet. All this has happened in a very short period of time and with very little fuss.

A successful and well-liked prime minister (Ahmet Davutoğlu), who received around 49.5 percent electoral support as recently as November 1, 2015, has had to leave his post without either he or his party offering any convincing reason for his departure. Even though he registered his displeasure with his forced removal by stating that his departure was not his choice, leading to a certain amount of controversy in the general public, his departure occurred relatively smoothly and did not cause any major upheavals within the party. Former minister of transportation and Erdoğan's long-time friend Binali Yildirim was named to both positions in the party's Second Extraordinary Congress with ease. And during all these processes, Erdoğan remained the ultimate decision-maker.

Alternative From Within

Davutoğlu has repeatedly stressed that his leaving the office of prime minister does not mean the end of his political career. On the contrary, he has pledged to continue his political journey. His style and statements indicate that he is determined to keep a good rapport with the AKParty's social base while trying to carve out a unique style and stance for himself among its top leadership and elite. In other words, he wants to represent a different voice, even a different politics, to those that have been in place in recent years, while still remaining within the political umbrella of the AKParty: an alternative from within.

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The question is how likely it is that Turkey's electorate will see Davutoğlu again in the political spotlight? The answer to this question will be contingent upon how Turkey's politics evolve from here. If Erdoğan succeeds in changing Turkey's political system from a parliamentary system to an executive presidency, it is unlikely that there will be a search for a new voice or a new style of politics within the AKParty, particularly in the short to midterm. But if the AKParty fails in this attempt, then it is possible that such a search might occur.

Before trying to project future scenarios, there are other much more pressing issues at hand. What does this recent reshuffle mean for the AKParty? What kind of a political design does Erdoğan seem to be putting in place?

From its founding, the AKParty was more than a party. It was a movement that also encompassed a political party. One of the reasons that the separation between these two was not very obvious previously was related to the fact that Erdoğan was both

the leader of the party and the movement. But once Erdoğan was elected president of Turkey and became constitutionally obliged to sever his ties to any political party, the difference between the two came to the fore. Davutoğlu became the chairman of the party and the prime minister, but Erdoğan remained the leader figure for the larger conservative-Islamic social base in Turkey. There emerged two power centers: one of them was legal/constitutional represented by Davutoğlu, the other was sociological/political represented by Erdoğan. Erdoğan was not willing to give up on his sociological-political leadership of the party's social base and political cadres; Davutoğlu was not willing to forsake his legal and constitutional authority.

The challenge was how to manage this difficult situation while keeping the AKParty's political coherence, and sustain its public support. It seems that the AKParty and Erdoğan arrived at the following conclusions during the transition of the party leadership from him to Davutoğlu:

- First, a powerful prime minister is necessary for sustaining the AKParty's public support and electoral success. Despite coming from the same political tradition, a powerful prime minister would naturally have his own political convictions and vision.
- Second, the party needed to make sure this difference in style and politics would not culminate in the de facto fragmentation of the party, and the larger conservative-Islamic segment of the society.

One can plausibly argue that Davutoğlu has strived hard to succeed on both accounts. He represented a new voice, with his own aura, politics and political style, but he also strived to make sure that this difference in style and politics would not result in any rupture within the party. With the benefit of hindsight, it seems that he succeeded on the latter point more at the level of the party's social base than among its elites.

These two factors have helped Davutoğlu to be regarded as the genuine chairman of the party and

prime minister of the country by many. The party's social base seems to have embraced him; his approval rating was high. He supported changing Turkey's political system, and broadly speaking he remained on the same page as Erdoğan on other major political issues. However, his support was not unconditional. It seems that Erdoğan and some segment of the AKParty's elite regarded this conditionality, coupled with Davutoğlu's high approval rating, as a growing divergence of political visions that could potentially institutionalize itself within the party. This reading appears to have played the primary role in Davutoğlu's removal.

After the experience removing Davutoğlu, the AKParty and Erdoğan seem to have changed tack. The formula of a powerful president and powerful prime minister has been replaced by a formula of a powerful president and technocratic prime minister. The new prime minister, Yıldırım, will be a more loyal and technocratic premier; it is highly likely he will leave all the important domestic and foreign policy issues to Erdoğan. Besides this personal level commitment, Erdoğan has also redesigned the party's most powerful internal bodies and put in place a new cabinet which will give him structural control over both. These factors create the foundation for the de-facto exercise of the presidential/semi-presidential system in Turkey, in the case that the government fails to change the political system constitutionally.

Separation of the Party and Cabinet Portfolios

One of the important developments that took place in the aftermath of the governmental redesign was the separation of the party and cabinet portfolios. Previously, most, if not all, of the cabinet members occupied seats on the party's central Executive and Decision-Making Board (MKYK). But this has now changed, and out of 26 members of the cabinet (barring the prime minister), only 5 members have a place on the MKYK list. This stands in stark contrast to previous governments and MKYK compositions. Another new feature is that it is made up of relatively young, lesser-known names, most of whom owe their political

career to Erdoğan. Relatively few of them can claim a political history prior to the AKParty. And it is not only that Erdoğan has opened up political opportunities for them, they also regard that the more central political power Erdoğan acquires and continues to exercise, the better career prospects they are likely to have. This picture, irrespective of his position, gives Erdoğan ultimate authority over the party.

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On the other hand, the composition of the cabinet that has been announced on May 24 has defied expectations. It is an experienced and relatively high-profile cabinet. Yet, it is clearly technocratic and aimed at service delivery. While a relatively young and loyal party leadership ensures Erdoğan's complete grip over the party, this cabinet is designed to sustain public support for the AKParty.

Ideology and Vision versus Electoral Success

Given that Davutoğlu was a key figure in the AKParty's ideological leaning and political vision, particularly on foreign policy, his departure should not be solely examined within the transition of power terminology. This departure also implies some consequences for the AKParty's political vision. Generally speaking, all political parties gain their legitimacy from their political vision, ideology, and political performance.

The AKParty, for the most part, derived its legitimacy both from its electoral successes and its vision for reimagining Turkey. For different groups this meant different things. For instance, while the Kurds saw this vision as the enhancement of their cultural-political rights, a religious person may have interpreted this as

the extending the boundaries of religious freedoms. For a long time, the AKParty has delivered on both accounts. It has performed successfully in each successive election while satisfying its varied political base's political aspirations.

However, in recent years, the AKParty's electoral success has overshadowed its political vision as its primary legitimating factor among the broad socio-political base that it encompasses. The dramatic reduction in terms of the number of high profile political figures who embody the AKParty's previous political vision in the party's governing bodies and the increase in the technocratic nature of the cabinet both illustrate this trend. Electoral success, more than political vision/narrative, seems to have become the main allure of the AKParty for its supporters.

The advantage of the AKParty is that its base is dynamic and strives for socio-economic advancement. Meanwhile, opposition parties are moribund and cannot convince these same people that they will better serve their desire for socio-economic progress. For these voters, Erdoğan symbolizes the embodiment of their socio-economic progress. They see his role as vital in the continuation of this trend. But their support is not unconditional. The AKParty has a significant chunk of voters who cast their votes based on performance, perhaps as much as 20-25 percent of the party's constituency. The fluctuation of the AKParty's votes (from approximately 40.7 to 49.5 percent in the June 7 and November 1, 2015 elections respectively) and the level of support (around 40 percent) that polling firms find for the change of the political system more or less illustrate the general size of this base. It demands explanations and expects persuasive arguments from the political class that it is supporting. The rationale behind the departure of Davutoğlu is and will be questioned particularly by these voters. The AKParty, in one way or another, needs to satisfy them through its policies and discourse.

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