

**In Brief:** An analysis of the dimensions of political stability in Turkey, it appears that in the pursuit of some dimensions of stability that the president and the government argue are not well achieved under the current system, other dimensions of stability are not now being served. The focal institution that has triggered this discussion of political stability is the presidency. The largely discreet battle on who would determine policy, and by how much, sometimes became visible. On some occasions, the president publicly criticized the government, pressuring it to change policies, generating uncertainties on how the government should proceed. Eventually, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan concluded that he needed a government more accommodating to his preferences. Contemporary Turkish politics, though stable, is becoming destabilized by the drive to replace the current parliamentary with a presidential system at whatever the cost, resulting in an unstable stability. The outcome is difficult to predict.

## From Unstable Stability to Stable Instability: Turkey's Travails

by *Ilter Turan*

I was recently asked to write a short piece for a handbook on the meaning of political stability. Writing for a lay audience, I began by noting that stability as used in politics was a multi-dimensional concept, and therefore it might be useful to specify which dimension we had in mind before talking about it. I identified six underlying dimensions that might come under the umbrella of political stability:

1. **Governmental stability** - whether the government team stays in office for long or is instead expected to change frequently;
2. **Performance stability** - whether the government can achieve its goals or whether this realization is limited;
3. **Policy stability** - whether the government changes policies frequently or pursues policies with consistency;
4. **Stability of the rule of law** - whether the government abides by the general principles of law and the specific laws of the land;
5. **Regime stability** - whether the particular arrangement through which a country is ruled is widely accepted or whether change is expected; and

6. **Stability of political geography** - whether the territorial unity of the country is assured.

If one were to use the above in analyzing contemporary Turkish politics, the following synopsis would emerge: Alleging that parliamentary governments are inherently unstable (**governmental stability**), Turkey's governing Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, AKParty under the guidance of its previous leader and now the president, wants to change the regime to a presidential system (**regime stability**). He has recently forced a change of government (**governmental stability**) whose performance he had constrained (**performance stability**) and sometimes forced to change by asking that his policy choices rather than those of the prime minister be implemented (**policy stability**). The active policy role the president follows deviates from what is outlined in the constitution (**stability of the rule of law**). To persuade the public that regime change is necessary, he has targeted the Peoples' Democracy Party, which he argues is the agent of the PKK, a terrorist organization pursuing ethnic Kurdish separatism (**stability of political geography**). It appears that in the pursuit of some dimensions of stability that the president and the government argue are not well achieved under the current system, other dimensions of stability are not now being served.

### The Presidential System Debate

The focal institution that has triggered this discussion of political stability is the presidency. Under the current constitution, the Turkish presidency is an office above party and daily politics, responsible for overseeing the harmonious functioning of the political system. Until 2012, members of parliament elected the president. After 1989, this arrangement came under challenge as incumbent prime ministers wanted to move into the most prestigious political job in the country while retaining prime ministerial powers. Both Turgut Özal and Süleyman Demirel initiated inconsequential debates about changing to a presidential system that, they argued, would bring greater

stability (**governmental**) and effectiveness (**performance and policy**).

The topic returned to the country's political agenda under fortuitous circumstances. In 2007, opposition parties successfully prevented the election of Abdullah Gül as president because his wife wore a headscarf. A constitutional amendment was enacted, subject to approval in a public referendum, to make the office publicly elected. In the meantime, new national elections were held with results that allowed Gül to become president. It would have been possible to suspend the pending referendum but the government proceeded to hold it. The amendment passed with a comfortable margin; many voters felt that Gül had been treated unfairly. Before Gül's term expired in 2014, Erdoğan announced his intention to seek the job. He received more than 52 percent of the vote in the subsequent election.

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### The Road to De Facto Presidential System

The constitutional amendment had changed only the method of electing the president but not the definition of the job or the powers that came with it. From the beginning, however, Erdoğan argued that having been popularly elected, he represented the national will, and the constitution should be changed to reflect this reality.

Since the restoration of civilian politics following the 1980-83 military intervention, there had been an intensifying desire to enact a new constitution that better served the needs of a democratic society. The AKParty had promised to achieve this goal. Its

insistence that the presidential system be a part of the package, an idea opposed by all other parties, has stood in the way of progress. The AKParty, on the other hand, does not have the qualified majority that would allow it to change the constitution directly or through a referendum.

Unable to change the constitution, Erdoğan has decided to assume an activist role in giving direction to his former party, its government, and policies. That he went to the national convention of his party after he had been elected president but not yet taken office and played a determining role in identifying who should become the party chief and therefore the prime minister, against convention and perhaps the law, was in indication of how he would conduct politics. He designated Ahmet Davutoğlu as his heir, interfered actively in deciding who would be given ministerial portfolios, and took an interest in appointments to higher ranks of bureaucracy. On occasion, he criticized the policy pronouncements of the government and asked, successfully, that they be changed. These actions were tantamount to a de facto changing of the constitution, undermining the **stability of the rule of law** as well as **governmental stability**.

### The Secret War

Despite the fact that Erdoğan had hand-picked the prime minister and had a big say in the selection of ministers, Prime Minister Davutoğlu proved to be too independent, frustrating the president's desire to be the chief policymaker. The reasons for the uncomfortable relationship between the two leaders were both structural and personal. On the personal side, it seems that Davutoğlu was not deeply committed to the establishment of a presidential system. His thinking on economics was also more conventional than that of the president, who felt, for example, that high interest rates caused inflation rather than the other way around. Furthermore, Davutoğlu felt that he had policy preferences he could implement without first submitting them to the approval of the president. Structurally there were two problems. First, the president could not

be always consulted on the daily operations of government, but sometimes the president did not like what was done. Second, legally the prime minister and his government were responsible for what the government did, leading them to conduct their affairs with that consideration in mind.

The largely discreet battle on who would determine policy, and by how much, sometimes became visible. On some occasions, the president publicly criticized the government, pressuring it to change policies (**policy stability**), generating uncertainties on how the government should proceed (**performance stability**). Eventually, Erdoğan concluded that he needed a government more accommodating to his

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preferences. He asked Davutoğlu to resign, a demand that the prime minister did not have enough power to resist. A hastily gathered party convention elected the former minister of transport, Binali Yıldırım, an Erdoğan loyalist, as the new party chief. The president then asked him to form the new government. The new prime minister appears to be exceptionally accommodating to the president; he has identified the establishment of a presidential system as the first item on his agenda. Whether, under the constraints of laws and political exigencies, he will satisfy the president or also be asked to leave in time is a matter of conjecture, but the fact that the president can make and unmake governments at will does not bode well for **governmental stability**.

### Ethnic Polarization as a Strategy for Constitutional Change

Shortly before he became president, Erdoğan scrapped the so-called Peace Process, a policy of reaching an

accord with the PKK. Terrorism that was on temporary hold during the Peace Process quickly returned, this time using a new policy of taking over sections of towns in Turkey's southeast as a prelude to establishing political authority. Law enforcement personnel have been clearing these towns of PKK irregulars, but public buildings, homes, and stores have been damaged, and many people have had to evacuate their homes.

Policy, as pronounced by the president has been uncompromising. He has said that terrorists would have to seal their weapons in concrete. He has asked public prosecutors to initiate procedures against the HDP (Peoples' Democracy Party) deputies whom he sees as accomplices of the PKK. Finally, he has managed to bring about a constitutional amendment removing the parliamentary immunity of deputies that courts had asked for permission to try. The HDP, a mainly Kurdish party, had been the intermediary in the negotiations between the government and the PKK. Although there are many other deputies that would also go to court under this provision, the HDP deputies are the real target. The president is expected to ask the parliament to rescind their membership after their conviction, and then call for a by-election in which his party would likely win enough additional seats to reach the number needed to change the constitution in favor of a presidential system and submit this for approval in a public referendum. Until that process is completed, the policy of ethnic polarization is likely to continue.

Turkey's politics are in flux. The unstable parliamentary system for which the presidential system is offered as a cure refers to pre-2002 period of unstable coalition governments. During that time, politics was perhaps characterized by a persistent and therefore stable instability. Contemporary Turkish politics, though stable, is becoming destabilized by the drive to replace the current parliamentary with a presidential system at whatever the cost, resulting in an unstable stability. The outcome is difficult to predict.

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#### **About the Author**

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