



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Islamist Parties in Turkey: A Perpetual Matryoshka

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Former Turkish PM Ahmet Davutoğlu, the personal choice of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for the office, and former deputy PM Ali Babacan, the respected economy czar, are bursting onto the political stage to challenge their former boss and comrade in arms. Their popularity remains unknown, but they could potentially change the political landscape and act as kingmakers.

The principal ideologue and leader of Islamism in Turkey was Necmettin Erbakan (1926-2011), none of whose various political parties managed to win enough of a majority to form a government until his short tenure in 1996. In 1997 he was ousted as PM in an embarrassing “soft coup” by Turkey’s staunchly secular generals: by covertly lobbying MPs, the military changed the parliamentary arithmetic against Erbakan and toppled him without having to fire a single bullet.

Islamists were outraged but did not get violent. Erbakan’s A Team had a different solution in mind: they would break with Erbakan’s classical, anti-western, anti-EU rhetoric and launch a new political party that would claim to champion reformist, liberal democratic values while Islamizing the country stealthily until the need for stealth disappeared.

Young Erbakan devotees Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Abdullah Gül, Ali Babacan, Beşir Atalay, Binali Yıldırım, and Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, among others, launched the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the giant political machine that has ruled Turkey since November 2002 without a single election loss. But three years ahead of the next presidential (and parliamentary) elections, Islamist politics is splitting again, with two politicians at the forefront who were once top AKP figures.

Former PM Ahmet Davutoğlu, Erdoğan's own pick for the office, and former deputy PM Ali Babacan, the respected economy czar, have stepped up to challenge their former boss and comrade in arms. The mastermind behind Babacan's grouping is former president Abdullah Gül, once Erdoğan's staunchest ally. Both politicians claim they broke with AKP to offer a more liberal, pro-West solution to Turkey's conservative voters. They accuse Erdoğan of pursuing illiberal policies in a strongman regime with no credibility in the democratic world.

This is the outline of Turkish politics at the beginning of 2020:

- **The government:** AKP and its (non-coalition) ally Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Combined, the "Alliance of the People" won 52.5% of the nationwide vote in the presidential elections of 2018. The bloc also has the support of a couple of small parties with no parliamentary representation.
- **The opposition:** The main opposition parties are the Republican People's Party (CHP), a secular, anti-Islamist party; and İYİ (the Good) Party, a group of center-right nationalists who split from the MHP. With overt support from a liberal Islamist party, Felicity, and pro-Kurdish HDP, the "Alliance of the Nation" typically represents the other portion of the voter base (less than half).
- **The electoral system:** Unless Erdoğan, who calls the shots, decides to go for snap polls, the Turks will go to the ballot box in 2023 to elect the president with 50% plus one in the first round of the vote and a simple majority in the second round if there is no winner in the first. In this electoral system, every single vote can be vitally important and every small party can be a kingmaker. No contender has the luxury to ignore any player, big or small.

Davutoğlu's Future Party and Babacan's grouping, not yet officially inaugurated, are entering the race in a multi-party, single-winner set-up. Ironically, their potential power comes from the electoral system Erdoğan devised to ensure his own invincibility. He would easily win any competition based on a left-right divide, but the present line of division is more complex than just left-right; it is quickly evolving into a pro- or anti-Erdoğan split.

The popularity of the Davutoğlu and Babacan parties has yet to be tested in credible polls. But even a combined 3-5 percentage point snatch from traditional (pro-Erdoğan) conservative voters could lead to a sea change in the political landscape. Hence Erdoğan's resentment of his former allies. In a speech last year, he called "those who jump off the train" traitors and threatened that they would pay for "dividing the *ummah*"; i.e., for challenging him and his voters.

Davutoğlu and Babacan ignored the warning, and Erdoğan was not slow to keep his word. In December the government took over Istanbul Şehir University, an elite school linked to Davutoğlu and his intellectual entourage. (The university was inaugurated by Erdoğan in 2010, with its founder, Davutoğlu, then foreign minister, proudly smiling in the background.)

After Şehir's fall, the Erdoğan government seized another Davutoğlu-linked institution, the Foundation for Sciences and Arts (BISAV in its Turkish acronym)—the home of much research and thousands of seminars and academic workshops on politics, history, economics, and literature since 1986. And in January, Davutoğlu said all founding members of Future had come under investigation. "But none of this will deter us," he said. "[W]e will continue to say what we believe to be right."

Although the governing bloc of AKP-MHP came first in nationwide municipal elections in March 2019, Erdoğan's Islamists lost Istanbul and Ankara for the first time since 1994, along with several other big cities on the Mediterranean coast. Istanbul's loss was particularly dramatic for Erdoğan. Home to 15% of Turkey's 57 million voters and accounting for 31% of Turkish GDP, Istanbul was an AKP bastion for 25 years. "He who wins Istanbul wins Turkey" has been Erdoğan's dictum since he won the city in 1994.

Erdoğan has three years to minimize the risk of losing in 2023—potentially an existential war for the Islamist strongman. As much as he must make the government bloc bigger, he must also make the opposition bloc smaller. Critical questions remain: Can he lure the IYI Party into the government bloc? Can he convince his former allies to unite behind him instead of joining the opposition? Both are possible on Turkey's extremely slippery political ground. But if Erdoğan fails to win more allies, he will face a real challenge for the first time since he won Turkey in 2002.

According to a credible opinion poll by Istanbul's Kadir Has University, AKP remains the top party with 40.2% of the vote, with the main opposition party, CHP, at 33%. But in this poll, AKP+MHP are at 48.5% while the combined opposition CHP+IYI+HDP wins 50.3% of the vote. This poll did not intend to measure the popularity of the two new parties. Political observers usually put their combined votes at anywhere between five to 10% if Turks went to the ballot box today. The question is: where would those five to 10 percentage points come from? An easy guess: mostly from AKP.

"We know that 24 hours is a long time in Turkish politics. It would be wrong to assume the new parties will by definition join the opposition bloc. Although this is the natural expectation, as they challenge Erdoğan, they never said their existence was anti-Erdoğan," explains Ercan Gürses, a prominent political

analyst and Ankara bureau chief for Kanal D television. “As a matter of fact it would be wrong both to ignore the new parties altogether or to exaggerate their potential against Erdoğan. Under the current system even a party with one or two percentage points’ potential will have the power to bargain.”

One challenge for the opposition bloc will be to keep itself in one piece; i.e., not lose a member to the pro-Erdoğan camp. Another challenge will be to lure the Davutoğlu and Babacan parties into the opposition bloc. Finally, and most importantly: the herculean task of finding a single contender against Erdoğan who would be supported by all these opposition players, regardless of their deep ideological differences.

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