

# **'Overdue reforms will once again put Turkey's democracy to the test in 2008'**

IN THE PAPERS OF JEAN MARCOU

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**'Overdue reforms will once again put Turkey's democracy to the test in 2008' : Jean Marcou is a researcher at the French Institute for Anatolian Studies in İstanbul, in charge of the Observatory of Turkish Political Life (OVIPOT).**

His research focuses on Turkey's constitutional architecture and current mutations, Turkish political life, Turkey's candidacy to the European Union and foreign policy. He is the author of "Turkey at the European Time," a book in collaboration with Jean-Paul Burdy to be published in spring 2008.

*In an interview with Today's Zaman, Marcou shared his thoughts about some of the issues that have caused much ink to flow in Turkish news lately. Marcou picked five of 10 pieces of paper submitted to him and provided spur-of-the-moment reactions to the topics they contained.*

*The Kurdish question and the Turkish political class*

*'The DTP needs to assimilate the rules of parliamentary democracy if it is to survive'*

"The Kurdish question resulted in a restructuring of Turkey's political chessboard, despite long-lasting deadlocks. The last legislative elections brought into Parliament deputies from the Democratic Society Party (DTP) claiming to represent the Kurdish cause. But what is at stake here is for those deputies to actually play the political game. The Kurdish question aside, the DTP is obviously facing problems of simple know-how, or how one party should engage in parliamentary democracy and assert one's rights and positions accordingly. The DTP has long been operating outside the legislature and now needs to follow the rules of parliamentary democracy. The reason why a party such as the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) wins elections is that it masters the democratic functioning of the state and asserts itself as a civilian formation. It is a question of know-how more than one of political positioning. The DTP pretends to represent a minority that also consists of movements engaged in violence — somewhat similar to what we witnessed with the Basques in France and Spain. Once a party is engaged in political struggle, it has to take position vis-à-vis outlawed organizations involved in armed struggle. The DTP is stuck between two fires at the moment."

## **How did you react to the news of legal proceedings targeting the DTP ?**

"These proceedings are a symbol of Turkey's difficulty in giving a political dimension to the Kurdish question. All parties that have been trying to represent the Kurdish population in the Turkish Parliament since the early 1990s have faced that same threat of closure. In regard to the recent elections, the news of such proceedings came as a disappointment to many. The current assembly ensures a broader representation of all Turks from various origins. Closing down the DTP would be tantamount to imposing a dead stop to the political overture promoted after the elections. Meanwhile, the DTP and the ambiguities around its ties with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) are also to blame for that situation. Turkish nationalists as well as PKK members who reject any political solution have an interest in the DTP's closure. But effective closure would put the other actors in a deadlock because what is at stake here is Turkey's ability to find a political solution to the Kurdish question. Turkey's negotiations for accession to the European Union, the democratization and demilitarization processes ... all those factors could lead the country to a resolution of the Kurdish problem. Nevertheless, nationalist tensions remain and their unpredictable nature is fully capable of jeopardizing the whole process."

## **The AK Party and European reforms**

'The 2007 elections celebrated the victory of a party favoring the EU, not the EU's victory'

"The AK Party turned Europe into a symbol of the change it vowed to represent. It distanced itself from its Islamist origins by supporting Turkey's accession to the EU. Until now, the AK Party has kept its word in pursuing and even more so [in] giving a critical boost to Turkey's European strategy. Negotiations for accession officially began in late 2005, a long-time dream of all the AK Party's predecessors since the 1950s. But while reforms have been implemented, it seems clear to me that the AK Party has also used the European bid for purely tactical purposes — namely, to signify the change it claimed to embody and to prove its democratic and reformist nature. Reforms have come to a halt since 2004-2005, as preparations for elections began. The resumption of reforms is therefore a critical test for the current government, especially in the wake of growing Euro-skepticism in the last two or three years. A majority of Turks no longer favor accession to the EU, but they paradoxically voted for the most European of all Turkish parties. Meanwhile, parties that traditionally supported the accession — presenting it as the ultimate accomplishment of Kemalist reforms — are now more inclined toward Euro-skeptic views. The last elections celebrated the victory of a party favoring the EU, but it would be wrong to regard them as the victory of Europe. The AK Party has entered a critical phase with the necessity for profound European reforms that imply a total adhesion to European values (human rights, rule of law, market economy, democratic development, demilitarization...)"

### **How do you analyze Turkey's reaction to French President Nicolas Sarkozy's moves against its EU bid ?**

"The Turkish government has great difficulties [in understanding] the French president's position towards Turkey and the EU. That is because Turkey's accession to the European Union has been a Turkish political goal for decades and a defining sign of the AK Party. Turkish leaders feel a form of hostility from the current French authorities. I don't know if that is the case, given that positions vary a lot in France's power circles nowadays. You find people opposed to Turkey's accession but open to cooperation ; people favoring Turkey's accession openly or in veiled terms. ... But I also think both sides have come to understand that the question has now entered an intermediate phase. ['Wait and see'] seems to be the motto of French and Turkish governments alike. France has not blocked the process and Turkey is carrying on negotiations. The process is not in jeopardy. It simply takes time for everyone to assert their position and decide on what is doable or not."

## **The elections and the 2007 referendum**

'The AK Party was impressive in its ability to distance itself from ideological struggles and to lead truly general elections'

"Despite the crisis that preceded this year's legislative elections, the vote revealed the good shape of Turkey's democracy. We witnessed pre-electoral debates and fair elections. Personally, I was impressed by the AK Party's ability to distance itself from ideological struggles and to lead truly general elections. At the beginning of the process, many feared a configuration in which laics [secularists] would oppose the AK Party in a debate focusing on ideological questions such as the republic's future, the role of religion and of the army in the state. ... In fact, there was a real electoral campaign revolving around the government's achievements and objectives. The AK Party pointed to clear, concrete issues that appealed to the electorate and that attitude, I think, explains its political success."

### **What about the constitutional referendum of last October ?**

"That referendum presented a real ambiguity. The decision itself was a direct consequence of the presidential crisis. The constitutional package was designed as a response to the invalidation of Abdullah Gül's election by the constitutional court. It was therefore a riposte planned in a particular context."

However, the government initiated a new phase in September with the preparation of a new civilian constitution. In those conditions, the decision to hold a constitutional referendum was a quite puzzling one. Why did the government not choose to include the constitutional package in the preparation of the new constitution? I would have understood that move if the package had consisted of minor amendments. But here we were talking about universal suffrage for the presidential election, change in the length of the deputies' and president's mandates. ... Those are reforms whose outcome is unclear, but that make more sense in the debate over a new civilian constitution. There again, I think the government adopted a tactical move that would grant it an 'easy' victory."

### **What is your view on the debates surrounding Gül's election to the presidency ?**

"The election of a new president in the first months of 2007 produced a confrontation between the AK Party's government — aspiring to a civilian normalization of Turkey's political life — and the establishment within the political system itself. I wasn't surprised by those debates, which revealed the real stakes of Turkey's democratization process. I was, however, surprised by the AK Party's attitude in those debates. You would have thought that a party that built its legitimacy on consensus would have sought a compromise or would have given up eventually. I knew from the beginning that Erdoğan would not be candidate, because the prime minister, not the president, is the one leading policies in Turkey's parliamentary system. I was nonetheless surprised by the choice of Abdullah Gül, who belongs to the AK Party's political heart. I was expecting a much more consensual personality. The government knew it should expect conflicts and maintained its position, even while confrontation was at its highest. I was struck by the AK Party's inflexibility in following a non-compromising line. That tells us how the AK Party is sticking to its goal to create a political rupture and to initiate a number of reforms. Now the question is : Will the AK Party seek a compromise with the establishment or will it favor a soft yet determinate strategy of rupture ?"

### **The secularist state and the headscarf debate**

'Turkey might soon witness a bottom-up re-secularization process, instead of the Islamization many fear'

"That is a very symbolic and telling debate, and a prism through which one witnesses the evolution of the Turkish society. It first raises constitutional debates, with the issue of the ban over headscarves at universities and the government's will to lift that ban, which would lead to a constitutional reform. For the traditional, laic state, the headscarf becomes a danger in certain places and female, educated students wearing headscarves are assimilated to conservative if not fanatic Muslims. Some even claim that the AK Party's government has triggered a form of bottom-up Islamization of society, seen as a threat to the republic and to democracy itself. In fact, I think the headscarf's visibility nowadays is mainly due to urbanization and changes in way of life in modern Turkey. I am not only talking about people leaving the countryside for cities, but about families who have been urbanized for one or two generations and whose children are now adopting new ways of life between familial traditions and modernity. I think we could witness new hybridizations and even a form of re-secularization of Turkey in coming years. A top-down process of secularization accompanied the foundation of the republic in 1923. Conversely, Turkey might soon witness a bottom-up re-secularization, coming from society itself. This phenomenon could manifest itself, for example, in the way people consider traditionally religious festivities."

### **The Mediterranean Union project**

'The project needs flesh on its bones and a clear positioning vis-à-vis pre-existing structures in the Mediterranean region'

"It is hard to comment on a project that it is still being elaborated. It was initiated during Sarkozy's electoral campaign simultaneously with the question of Turkey's candidacy to the EU and as an alternative to it at the very beginning. Today, the project needs flesh on its bones, but I think it should no

longer be understood as an alternative to Turkey's accession to the EU, as Sarkozy's Tangiers speech finally showed. Mediterranean countries obviously have high expectations vis-à-vis cooperation possibilities in the area. The first problem is one of positioning : How will the project of the Mediterranean Union exist on its own among the already-existing projects in the region ?”

### **Which projects are you referring to ?**

“First, there is the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, launched in 1995 as a global process with political, economic and cultural aspects. That partnership was designed to allow 25 EU member states and 10 Mediterranean partners to work together. On the 10th anniversary of its inception, the countries involved — especially Arab ones — complained about very mitigated and disappointing results. They notably asserted that Europe seemed more interested in its Eastern borders than in its Southern borders.

“A second process is the European Neighborhood Policy, which is broader than the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and does not concern countries that are in the process of joining the EU. The idea is for the EU to have secured borders and be surrounded by friendly countries. The European Neighborhood Policy includes, in addition to countries from the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, Caucasian countries, Moldavia, Belarus and Ukraine. Turkey is not concerned by this policy, given its official candidacy to the EU.”

### **So what role could the Mediterranean Union play in that grander scheme ?**

“The question is : Is it a project designed to exist on its own or designed to boost pre-existing mechanisms ? The Mediterranean region faces problems as crucial as clandestine immigration, security, environment. ... For this zone to be a coherent European border, there need to be solutions to the problem of uneven development. One of the most daunting conflicts for the success of such enterprises is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Those sorts of issues form the core challenge of a ‘Mediterranean Union.’ My opinion is that we should not have a too restrictive vision of that project. Its heart is of course the Mediterranean region, but it would also excel at creating contacts between different regions. Northern European countries should therefore not be excluded from the project, since those countries are increasingly present in the Mediterranean and have financial means that could greatly contribute to the project.

“There is also a need for the Mediterranean region to benefit from partnerships in the south. I am thinking about Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, which have an interest in the stability of their borders. I am also thinking about the Black Sea, where huge strategic matters are at stake. Given the challenges in the region, Turkey would have an interest in taking part in this project. But obviously, it will only do so provided that it is not linked to its EU candidacy and presented as an alternative to it.”

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### **Sources**

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