

A Transitioning Turkey: Out with the Old, in with the New?

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Turkey is experiencing a crisis of orientation in its internal and external affairs as a result of a transition between a dying and an emerging vision. The end of the current transitional period will not necessarily mark the end of the country's crisis, but most probably its entrenchment or deepening.

Theoretically, it is the vision that creates the need for a particular means of pursuing it. Nevertheless, in today's Turkey, the emerging vision is the result of a reversed relationship between vision and means of pursuit. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) leadership's primary focus is perceived to be on institutionalising a hegemonic presidency, i.e. a certain type of governance and is gradually imposing a systematic nationalistic vision on the present decision-makers, accompanied by the employment of equally nationalistic discourse and deeds. The pursuit of this mode of governance has the potential to entrap present and future decision-makers in its dynamics with dire consequences for the country and its neighbourhood. The end of the current transitional period between the old and the emerging vision will not necessarily mark the end of the country's crisis, but most probably its entrenchment or deepening.

So far, the morbid symptoms of this period can be identified in the ever [higher polarisation](#) between the AKP and opposition parties and the mounting tension between the government and a big segment of the civil society, particularly after the 15 July failed coup when the [Turkish authorities](#) closed down more than a thousand NGOs and trade unions, and a hundred media establishments without judicial proceedings. In addition, Turkey's state apparatus has showed strong signs of partisanship either in favour of AKP or against it. The failed coup attempt in July 2016 and the AKP's immediate [backlash](#) in an attempt to re-establish full control over all institutions are a strong indication of that. Furthermore, the AKP decision-makers have been developing what appears to be erratic behaviour in their foreign policy towards the US, EU and Russia which does not appear to be part of a clear foreign policy strategy.

These observations beg the questions; what is the dying strategic vision, and how is the AKP leadership seeking to replace it, and what are the implications for Turkey's future?

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A Dying Strategic Vision

An important strategic vision of consecutive Turkish governments, which had attracted cross-party support, including that of the AKP, Republican People's Party (CHP) and Kurdish parties, was to join the European Union. This objective united the country around a common political and economic agenda. Towards that end, Turkey embarked on a series of reforms in different policy areas, including rule of law, civil-military relations and Kurdish rights. At the same time, the AKP government was able to promote the principle of zero-problems with neighbouring countries and develop strong trade relations with many of them, such as Syria and Greece on a bilateral basis.

However, [Turkey's EU orientation](#) does not seem to be a priority for the AKP leadership anymore, including the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Despite volatility in EU-Turkish relations in the past years due to some EU member states' concerns about Turkey joining the EU as a full member, such as Sarkozy's France, and certain legal challenges regarding the smooth continuation of the EU accession negotiations due to the unresolved Cyprus issue, Turkey had remained in EU orbit. This began to change after last June's elections and accelerated after the failed coup attempt of July 2016.

The [AKP leadership](#) has been alienating the EU and its member states with its acrimonious language against them. Furthermore, it has been supporting the militarisation of the Kurdish issue through words and deeds, such as the detainment of Peoples' Democratic Party's (HDP) deputies and mayors. Finally, advocating regressive law changes, such as the reinstatement of the death penalty and [excesses of the state of emergency](#), has also been a point of reference for criticism by the EU and its member states. Consequently, [the European Parliament](#) passed an advisory resolution that calls for the freeze of EU accession negotiations until the "disproportionate repressive measures" are lifted. This is the first time that such a motion has been passed by the European Parliament, illustrating the new lows of EU-Turkey relations.

This raises the question as to whether the clash between the EU and Turkey is indicative of the AKP leadership's policy choice aimed at replacing a dying strategic vision with a newfound one.

An Emerging Vision, A Reversed Relationship

Currently, the [AKP leadership](#) is investing enormous political capital in the realisation of transforming the parliamentary system into a presidential one without reliable checks and balances. In other words, they want to institutionalise hegemonic rule. Many [AKP officials](#) have observed that the country needs to accept the de facto presidential system and turn it into a de jure one. The AKP has been trying to convince the opposition parties to lend their support for the relevant constitutional amendments as they require 14 more parliamentarians.

The AKP, on the other hand, has managed to mend fences with the leadership of the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP), despite [Devlet Bahçeli's](#) serious allegations back in December 2015 against Recep Tayyip Erdogan. However, the militarisation of the Kurdish question, the adoption of a strong nationalistic and [revisionary rhetoric](#), with parallel public statements of the President about the need to reconsider the merits of [the Lausanne Treaty](#) for Turkey and his intention to reinstate the death penalty, has allowed the AKP to play in MHP's domain. This potentially renders MHP's position in the parliament precarious in the event of an early call for elections in case it receives less than 10% (the electoral threshold). This strategy seems to have paid off as MHP has become the main supporter of AKP's plan despite initial objections. On the other hand, the AKP appears rhetorically entrapped, as [MHP](#) has called for AKP to keep its promise and bring the death penalty to the parliament.

Furthermore, in agreement with his domestic objectives and policies, Erdogan has reconciled with Putin's Russia by apologising for shooting down a Russian plane back in 2015, and accepting Russia's primary role in Syria. This can be considered as a balancing act against the EU's mounting criticism over rule of law, human rights and the overall stance of the AKP leadership vis-à-vis the Kurdish question. Most importantly, Russia does not condition its relations with Turkey upon the aforementioned issues.

However, the question remains: can the institutionalisation of hegemonic rule become the replacement to Turkey's dying strategic vision? The question is rather rhetorical, since theoretically speaking modes of governance are means to achieve strategic goals and not strategic goals themselves. Nevertheless, in Turkey, the means of governance have become the strategic vision with matching discourse and policy.

Specifically, the institutionalisation of presidential hegemonic rule in Turkey will create structural impediments to any potential positive changes regarding consolidating democracy and resolving the Kurdish question. Where the first requires a clear distinction between the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, the second necessitates some devolution of power. Subsequently, the presidential hegemonic rule can potentially create a backlash in parts of Turkish society against the presidential institution, creating the need for constant guardianship on the part of the president and his supporters. This would in turn translate into systematic nationalistic discourse and actions in order to fend off pressures from the liberal camp and the Kurdish element. In other words, the protection of the president's hegemonic power becomes the vision itself, engendering a constant internal battle between pro- and anti-elements, pushing the country into a growing crisis through polarisation.

To sum up, the AKP has – willingly or not – started defining a new strategic vision with a trend that is more reactionary, nationalistic and in direct conflict with the liberal values intrinsic to EU policies. The emerging strategic vision, however, is a residue of the AKP leadership's choice to transform Turkey's political system into a hegemonic presidency. Once the changes take place without consideration towards checks and balances and any possibility to devolve powers, then it will be extremely difficult for the AKP to turn back the clock. The means of governance would have created the strategic vision of ensuring that the hegemonic presidency survives internal and external pressures, even if this means suboptimal outcomes for the country, its population and its neighbourhood.

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