

## **Dirk Tröndle: Turkey's Party Democracy – Discussion about Political Parties, Electoral Legislation, and the Political Culture**

Ever since the first ballot of the presidential elections was annulled by the constitutional court in the beginning of May 2007, thus keeping 'political Islam' from taking over the highest office of state, the tone between the opposition and the spokesmen of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Parti) in Turkey has become more caustic. Historically, the atmosphere within the country is nothing new. As recently confirmed by the case of Abdullah Gül who withdrew his candidacy although he was the only candidate for the office, the election of a president has always been accompanied by crises: Mustafa Kemal arranged his own election to become the first president in 1923, at a time when his opponents were far from Ankara. In 1938, an assassination was plotted against his successor, Ismet İnönü, and in 1960, the presidential candidate, Ali Fuat Basgil, was threatened by putschists. Parliamentarianism in Turkey is unconsolidated to this day. At this point, it is worth while to take a closer look.

The development of Turkey's political-party system began with the foundation of the Society of Self-sacrifice in 1859, at the time of the Ottoman Empire. In 1876, after the conclusion of the 'beneficial reorganisation', non-Muslims were given equal opportunities in society. The first constitution treaty was signed one year before the Ottoman parliament met for the first time. However, as it was suspended shortly afterwards by Sultan Abdülhamit II., this first attempt at democratisation was named the 'phantom spring'.

It was not until the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 that one could speak of modern parliamentarianism, although it presented itself as a one-party system. After all, it was believed that a strong government of the Republican People's Party (CHP) as the only political group would facilitate the implementation of Atatürk's ideas, which virtually created its own opposition when the Progressive Republican Party and the Free Republican Party were founded in 1924 and 1930, respectively. In 1939, critics within the CHP were admitted as a separate parliamentary group in opposition to the CHP government, and in 1945, the lack of a genuine opposition party was even called a birth defect in Turkish parliamentarianism.

The National Development Party (MKP) and the Democratic Party (DP) formed a little later. In the parliamentary elections of 1950, the latter won more than 50 percent of the vote, thus ending the 'political monopoly' of the CHP. Within the CHP as well as within the DP, a centre party which champions traditional values and shows liberal tendencies, efforts to liberalise religion gained influence. Even non-Islamic minorities benefited from the new religious policy: The fact that it was allowed to visit the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Athinagoras in the Hagia Sophia speaks for itself.

For Turkey's parliamentarianism, the years between 1960 and 1980 were a time of instability: 20 governments came and went, and the military intervened three times – in 1960, in 1970, and in 1980. Ever since the constitution of 1961 was adopted, the first to mention political parties as necessary elements of a democratic state, the country saw the foundation of numerous new parties. When the DP was banned, it was succeeded by the Justice Party (AP) which obtained 34.8 percent of the vote in 1961. Its rise coincided with the first Turkish coalition government. After the AP had left the government, it was replaced by the New Turkey Party (YTP) and the Republican Peasant Nation Party (CKMP). Under Süleyman Demirel, the AP again won more than half the votes in 1964; it remained in power until 1974.

At the beginning of the '70s, new parties emerged that were more radical. The pointedly Islamic National Order Party (MNP) was considered the mouthpiece of the 'Anatolian hinterland', but was prohibited in 1970. In 1972, it was succeeded by the National Salvation Party (MSP) which obtained somewhat less than twelve percent of the vote in 1973. The years between 1975 and 1980 were marked by unstable leadership. For five terms of office, Süleyman Demirel and Bülent Ecevit took turns at the helm of the state. In 1983, Turgut Özal founded the Motherland Party (ANAP) which from then on made up the government on its own. Amalgamating quite different ideological currents, the Özal 'dynasty' had a lasting effect on the country. In the elections of 1987, the ANAP suffered some losses; however, it was able to retain most of its MPs. A new star was the True Path Party founded by Mr Demirel, which won 20 percent of the vote.

Succeeding Kenan Evren, Turgut Özal became president in 1989. Three years later, the ANAP came in at only four percent and lost its representation in parliament. The '90s were marked by ideological battles and the rivalry between Mesut Yilmaz, a member of the ANAP, and Tansu Ciller, a representative of the DYP, which prevented the frequently-discussed merger of the two parties. The party which benefited from this dispute was the Welfare Party (RP) of Necmettin Erbakan, who fetched more than 20 percent of the vote in 1995 and became prime minister in 1996. One year later, however, he lost his office, and his party was banned. Its legacy was assumed by the newly-founded Virtue Party (FP), in which traditionalists, such as Mr Erbakan, were confronted by reformers, such as Mr Gül. While the traditionalists founded their own, although unimportant, Felicity Party (SP) shortly afterwards, the reformers merged with other actors of the centre-right spectrum under the leadership of Tayyip Erdogan to form the Justice and Development Party (AK Parti). Its victory in 2002 marks the beginning of a stable period in Turkish parliamentarianism.

Turkey's party landscape shows some special features. Next to 'normal' party practices there are a number of factors which cause the instability of parliamentarianism: Traditionally-grown popular parties whose policy concept is guided by public welfare exist only to some extent. A party's internal democracy usually comes second to the power of the chairman. Party spin-offs and party amalgamations happen as frequently as defections of MPs. Focussing on election results, the parties' organisation is fragile. Parties are funded by the state. The voters' attachment to the parties is subject to fluctuations, and those who vote for a party are not generally guided by its programme. The popularity of the moderate parties on the left and right edges of the political spectrum has dwindled. It is very rare for parties to make firm coalition promises before elections are held. And the presentation of alternative bills as well as constructive criticism of the government is not exactly one of the opposition's strong points.

Any discussion about the electoral legislation of Turkey involves the question of whether an electoral system should follow the maxim of representing as many voters as possible or aim to ensure the stability – and thus the action potential – of the government. While Turkey's constitution demands both, it does favour stable majority governments. When the DP was founded in 1946, several parties were competing for the support of the electorate. In 1950, free elections were held for the first time, promptly followed by amendments to the electoral legislation: proportional representation was replaced by the first-past-the-post rule. A bicameral system consisting of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey and the Senate of the Republic was introduced in 1969.

In 1982, the military passed a resolution on proportional representation with a double election

threshold. Throughout the country, the ten-percent-hurdle and – not for the first time – the constituency hurdle applied, and mandates were allocated by the d'Hondt system. The Senate was abolished, and the number of parliamentary seats – to secure a strong government – was reduced to 400. Turkey's electoral legislation was again modified in 1995. The contingent rule was cancelled, and the constituency hurdle was abolished late in the year. This is where the circle closes: The pure first-past-the-post rule of the '50s was followed by a proportional representation system in the '60s and '70s which endeavoured to combine the advantages of both.

What applies in Turkey today is a simple proportional representation with legislative periods of five years. The constituencies are made up by the 81 provinces (formerly governorates); mandates are allocated by the d'Hondt system. In parliamentary elections, a threshold of ten percent has applied since 1983, a regulation which, however, is being challenged as it has not only brought about stable governments but has always presented a problem of legitimation. Every Turkish citizen aged 18 and older has the right to vote, although there are some restrictions. At the end of 2006, the age to stand for election was lowered from 30 to 25.

There certainly are suggestions for further changes to the electoral legislation. Thus, for example, Servet Armagan, a law expert from Istanbul, spoke out in favour of the majority vote. Constitutional-law expert Burhan Kuzu wants the smaller parties to be strengthened as he believes that political parties are the guarantors and the elixir of democracy. Moreover, there were demands that the election threshold should be reduced to five or, if necessary, seven percent for a time. Mr Erdogan and his AK Party even suggested establishing 'Turkish national members': Throughout the country, 100 of the 550 MPs were to be elected without an election threshold on the basis of proportional representation. Moreover, 'replacement members' were mentioned to keep MPs from changing their party in the middle of a legislative period. Some experts wish that local associations be granted a stronger voice. What would also be desirable is to strengthen the role of women and give more consideration to the young and the disabled.

Turkey's constitution mentions political parties as absolutely essential elements of democratic life. They may be founded without prior permission and may take action within the framework of the constitution and the law. Restrictions of their actions and prohibition proceedings are regulated by the Political Parties Act which says that parties may not engage in any activities that are directed against the unity and independence of the Turkish state and must respect human rights, the basic democratic order, and the principles of the Republic. Parties may not be financed by international organisations or other countries. Proceedings to ban a party are initiated by the chief prosecutor of the court of appeal and heard by the constitutional court, although no party may be deprived of the opportunity to file a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights.

The current debates about electoral and party legislation as well as the history of Turkish parliamentarianism itself show a tendency to judge electoral legislation mainly under the aspect of creating stable majorities. The principles of representativeness and equality, on the other hand, are taking a back seat. In this respect, action should be taken. What is also necessary, however, is to reform the party act, the parties' internal democracy, and party funding as well as, in general, to readjust the political culture and strengthen the country's civil society. Lack of civic commitment and low participation in the political decision-making process oppose the development of an active civil society. More than one step is needed to strengthen the political culture and parliamentarianism in Turkey. In fact, this requires a whole package of measures.

