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Rewarding Turkey

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Rewarding Turkey

Turkey's famously messy political system delivered a remarkable package of human rights reforms at the beginning of this month, removing the most important obstacles to eventual membership of the European Union. Add this to the far-reaching series of structural reforms in banking, public finance and state ownership enacted over the last couple of years and you have nothing short of a revolution in the way the country's economy and society are being run.

The big question is whether these changes will be enough to bring economic and political stability to a country that is just beginning to recover from the effects of a deep financial crisis. The answer depends in no small part on how the EU chooses to respond.

Despite the recent good news, there are many clouds on Turkey's horizon. Economic management could still falter in the run-up to early elections, which have been called for November 3. These elections could well fail to deliver a clear winner, throwing the country into further uncertainty. If Brazil is eventually forced to restructure its debt, Turkey could be severely affected by the resulting fallout in financial markets. And last but not least, military conflict with Iraq would greatly complicate the economic and political picture.

The quest for EU membership serves as Turkey's anchor in its drive to complete the transformation towards a fully institutionalised, liberal democratic order based on a market economy. Progress on that quest also serves as an all-important signpost for financial markets and investors. The Turkish parliament's hurried action, after nearly a decade of procrastination, cannot be understood solely in terms of political expediency. All parties, including pro-Islamic ones and excepting only the ultranationalist MHP, voted in favour of the legislation, which included fundamental changes - from the repeal of the death penalty to the legalisation of broadcasting and education in all languages spoken in Turkey.

For the EU to belittle the nature and the magnitude of the step taken by the Turkish parliament on the eve of general elections and to equivocate on its response or present Turkey with yet another hurdle, such as a resolution in Cyprus, would not just be wrong. Such a response would also be politically, strategically and ethically self-defeating.

Politically, Turkey's historical choices of the past two centuries, namely modernisation along western secular lines in a predominantly Muslim society, have arguably acquired added significance in the aftermath of September 11. For the EU to adopt the line of the European Christian democratic parties, which declared in 1996 that the EU did not have room for a Muslim country, would send all the wrong signals.

Strategically, Turkey willingly became a security partner of the west during and after the cold war. Given the volatility of the Middle East and a possible war against Iraq, Turkey's credentials as a reliable ally would become even more precious. The claim that the EU's borders should not start at Iraq ignores the fact that having borders with an unstable Middle Easternised Turkey provides infinitely more reasons for concern.

The coming election in Turkey are one of the most important in the country's history. Almost all polls indicate that the pro-Islamic AKP led by Tayyip Erdoga has a comfortable lead. Concerns have been voiced both about Mr Erdoan's ideology and the military's response to yet another possible experiment with an Islamist-led government.

The west should worry more about the AKP's lack of experience, expertise and sophisticated cadres. The party would not be against the EU, but because it would ride a wave of resentment against International Monetary Fund-supported policies, it might back away from the economic programme without pursuing a coherent alternative.

In any case, it is too early to declare Mr Erdoan the winner of the elections. In Kemal Dervis, economy minister until his recent resignation, Turkey has a first-rate economic manager and a budding political actor. Should his efforts to unite the fragmented centre-left succeed, Turkey might enter the new year with a competent, fresh government committed to modernisation and to Turkey's European vocation.

The EU must become a constructive force in that process. If it prevaricates and fails to show the courage of its more cosmopolitan convictions, it will have missed a golden opportunity to shape the multicultural Europe of the future. It might also contribute to instability in Turkey. The ball is now in EU's court. Although much remains to be done on Ankara's part, failure to offer a date for starting accession negotiations will prove far more costly than embarking on the process of integration.

Soli Özel teaches at the department of international relations in Istanbul Bilgi University and is currently a visiting fellow at St Antony's College, Oxford.

Dani Rodrik is professor of international political economy at Harvard University

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