

**Democratic Progress Institute**

**Briefing Paper**

**The Next Two Years Ahead of Turkey: Two Leaders, Two  
Different Lines, Two Readings**

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## **DEMOCRATIC PROGRESS INSTITUTE BRIEFING PAPER:**

### **The Next Two Years Ahead of Turkey: Two Leaders, Two Different Lines, Two Readings**

**Cengiz Çandar<sup>1</sup>**

The Fourth Grand Congress of the AK Party (Justice and Development) was held on 30 September, providing us with significant clues about what lies ahead for Turkey over the next two years.

Tayyip Erdoğan attended the last party congress as the successful leader of the AK Party, which has been in power since 2002 after securing 34 per cent of the vote and having had the opportunity to form a majority government. Since then it has increased its vote share to 47 per cent in the 2007 election and 50 per cent in the 2011 election, meaning

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that Mr Erdoğan has been Prime Minister of Turkey for almost ten years. This was what rendered the Fourth Grand Congress of the AK Party such an important event.

The congress was, on the one hand, described as Tayyip Erdoğan's 'Farewell Congress' to his comrades in the party and, on the other hand, viewed as an opening congress for his journey to the Presidency in 2014. Indeed, he may become the first President of the Turkish republic in history to be directly elected by public vote.

The way in which the congress was organised, public perceptions and the speech that Tayyip Erdoğan was slated to deliver were eagerly anticipated and strongly emphasised, since they were seen to provide important clues for the near future of Turkey.

The day after the congress saw the opening of the new legislative year of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA). Traditionally, the TGNA starts its new term activities with an opening speech by the President. Therefore the speech of President Abdullah Gül, who had let it be known that he placed a great deal of importance upon it and that it included important messages, was also eagerly awaited.

Indeed, the divergence in message and emphasis between the speech delivered by Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan at the AK Party Congress on 30 September and the one given by President Abdullah Gül at the opening of the TGNA on 1 October, brought about various questions in relation to the near future of Turkey. The answers are not yet clear, but the speeches provided important clues.

Firstly, let us start with the AK Party Congress and Tayyip Erdoğan's speech...

For about a week before his congress speech, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan appeared as the guest of different groups of journalists on several television channels and made various statements. Some of these pertained to the Kurdish issue, generating speculation. These statements created great expectations that very important, new messages might appear in his speech to the congress.

Whilst Tayyip Erdoğan did not use clear and consistent language for the statements that he made on the television channels during the week before the AK Party Grand Congress, he used some words which hinted at the possibility of renewing contact with PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who remains isolated in custody on Imrali island and with whom no contact has been made for over a year.

These statements by Tayyip Erdoğan created much excitement and anticipation for the Congress speech. Erdoğan also engaged in heavy criticism of the BDP (Peace and Democracy Party), which is seen to toe the same political line as the PKK. He even went as far as to say that he did not wish to be under the same parliamentary roof as the BDP members, and by stressing that BDP did not belong to the TGNA but to the Qandil mountains in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, where the PKK leader group and military quarters are based, he declared that he did not wish to conduct any negotiations with BDP, raising question marks. A few months earlier, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan had developed the slogan 'fight against terror' (meaning the PKK) and 'negotiation with its extension in parliament' (meaning the BDP) as an answer to the questions about whether negotiations with PKK would start again.

The last statement made by Erdoğan before the congress brought with it charges that he had entirely changed his view of the issue and by reminding people of his words that hinted at the possibility of renegotiating with Abdullah Öcalan, it gave rise to ironic remarks such as 'negotiation with terror, fight against BDP.'

BDP circles were very cautious about the possibility of starting negotiations with Abdullah Öcalan again, even though it created very important expectations among the Kurdish public opinion, and they insisted that Erdoğan's remarks should be treated as a 'time gaining strategy.'

This interpretation was expressed in person to the author of these lines on the eve of the congress by Gültan Kışanak, Co-President of BDP in Siirt, which is in the Southeast region and one of the prominent Kurdish centres of Turkey.

A night before the congress, Tayyip Erdoğan, again in a television interview, used language that shut down the possibility of changing the custody conditions of Abdullah Öcalan. By declaring that he could not 'place himself under the burden of' being the one who would place the PKK leader under 'house arrest,' he increased the already existing question marks in people's minds.

During his speech at the AK Party Grand Congress, which had been anticipated with extraordinary curiosity under these conditions, he did not say anything new about the Kurdish problem that could match the expectations that he raised within that preceding week. The part pertaining to the Kurdish problem occupied four pages of a long transcript that ran to a total 61 pages, and instead of using it for the new steps that were being considered, Erdoğan used it to ask

for support from the 'Kurdish citizens' for his party.

Without mentioning a concrete mechanism and a specific addressee, Tayyip Erdoğan addressed the 'Kurds' as follows:

*'Here, from the Fourth AK Party Grand Congress, I especially call on my Kurdish brothers... Whether they vote for us or not, whether they like us or not, I would like every one of my Kurdish brothers who lives on this land to put his hand on his heart and speak to his conscience for a moment.*

*Without being under the influence of the propaganda of the terrorist organisation, without being under the influence of the propaganda of the extension of the terrorist organisation, I would like each of my Kurdish brothers to be alone with his conscience for one moment and to think.*

*Throughout the history of the Republic, which government could take such brave steps? Throughout the history of the Republic, which government did take such sincere steps? Throughout the history of the Republic, which period witnessed such an effort for brotherhood?*

*The AK Party ended the rejection, denial and assimilation policies against the Kurds that have been carried out for decades. It is the AK Party who removed the obstacles set before the Kurdish language. It is the AK Party who set up TRT Şeş and started 24 hour broadcasts in Kurdish... It is the AK Party who opened the way for Kurdish to be taught. It is AK who put a stop to the state of emergency. The AK Party pushed away the bans, restrictions and constraints with the back of its hand...*

*The AK Party is the party that has been sincerely defending all the freedoms of my*

*Kurdish brothers against the terrorist organisation, which for its part has been trying to control the East and the Southeast with a one-party, oppressive, authoritarian and fascist mentality...*

*So as of today we want to open a new chapter. To write this chapter together with my Kurdish brothers, to protect this clean chapter from violence and make it a chapter of peace, brotherhood... We took hundreds of steps towards our Kurdish brothers; and now, in this new chapter, we expect my Kurdish brothers to take a step towards us. We expect my Kurdish brothers to say ENOUGH and to bravely raise their voices against terror...'*

The approach that Prime Minister Erdoğan displayed in his speech has been perceived, without leaving much room for doubt, as proof that the uncompromising politics which have been employed against the PKK for over a year will be continued, and also that BDP will be excluded and that the Prime Minister has embraced the revoking of parliamentary immunity for some of the BDP deputies.

In August a group of BDP deputies, including BDP co-President and Siirt deputy Gültan Kışanak, and co-President of DTK (Democratic Society Congress) and Diyarbakir deputy Aysel Tuğluk, joined by press members, had embraced some armed PKK members at an impromptu roadside meeting in the Hakkari-Semdinli region. Images of the meeting created a reaction within the political circles of Ankara and in Turkish public opinion. It was thus argued that the immunity of the relevant BDP deputies should be revoked and that they should be put on trial for having 'a relationship with the terrorist organisation.'

Referring to this issue in his congress speech, Tayyip Erdoğan asked the Kurds to leave PKK and BDP and instead support him and his party. Whilst doing this he did not mention

any possible steps that may be taken in relation to the Kurdish problem.

Against the criticism that the Prime Minister's speech did not meet high expectations, those who emphasised the two-page and 63-article 'Promises' list and the 70-page booklet entitled 'the AK Party 2023 Political Vision,' which were both distributed at the congress venue, underlined that what mattered was the written list of promises and that both documents should be understood as 'a new contract' offered by the AK Party to society.

According to this view, the importance of a number of points within the 'List of Promises' containing 63 articles is stressed. We can list them as follows:

Article 21: Stopping the right to plead in one's native language from becoming a problem. (If this is regulated it can serve as a significant relief for the KCK trial which has put thousands of Kurdish activists on trial and reduce tension.)

Article 22: Access to public services in native languages.

Article 23: Establishing an independent security forces supervision mechanism. (This article outlines the establishment of an office that would deal with complaints from the Kurds in the Southeast and the East regarding the gendarmerie and other security forces, and as such can be recorded as an important improvement in terms of 'democratic reform.')

It can be seen that in addition to those directly concerning the Kurdish political circles, the 'List of Promises' also includes important 'democratisation' and 'reform'

pledges that concern the whole of Turkish society. The most important of them are the first 13 articles and these are:

1. Completely abolishing the banning of political parties.
2. Restrictive and prohibitive provisions for establishing political parties shall be abolished. (Programme, charter, organisation and so on.)
3. Abolishing the standardising provisions in political parties.
4. Putting an end to the banning of political parties.
5. Punishing real persons and not political parties.
6. Removing all obstacles to politics.
7. A complete review of all legislation concerning elections.
8. Taking precautions in order to ensure fairness in representation.
9. Restructuring the High Election Council.
10. Discussion of the Presidential and semi-Presidential systems, and the issue of a President tied to a political party.
11. Adoption of a new constitution for the country whatever the conditions are.
12. The re-regulation of the issue of immunity in accordance with universal criteria under the framework of the New Constitution.

13. Speeding up the judiciary, due process and legislating the Fourth Judiciary Package within the context of democratisation.

It is without doubt that should these 'promises' be delivered, or even cleared for realisation, Turkey will have taken important steps towards 'democratisation' and this will affect the political climate of the country in a positive way. Amongst the most prominent of the 'promises' listed above, a special emphasis is placed on the decreasing of the unprecedentedly high electoral threshold of ten per cent and that 'fairness in representation' will be fulfilled. This is accepted in and of itself as a significant parameter within the scope of politically resolving the Kurdish problem.

Meanwhile, it is also believed that the aforementioned 'List of Promises' and the envisaged 'constitution change' have been designed in accordance with the political goals of Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan. As has been stated before, the dramatic aspect of the AK Party Fourth Grand Congress is that this was the last congress that Tayyip Erdoğan attended as the AK Party Chairman and also as the Prime Minister. It is no secret that Tayyip Erdoğan has set his sights on becoming the first publicly elected President of Turkey in 2014, and in this respect the AK Party Fourth Grand Congress was seen, in one way, as Erdoğan's 'Farewell Congress' to the AK Party and, in another way, as the 'opening congress for his march towards presidency.'

As a matter of fact, Tayyip Erdoğan gave clues to his 'political calendar' at the congress by putting forward the concept of a 'President tied to a political party' whilst at the same time requesting 'the discussion of Presidential and semi-Presidential systems' and bringing

up the 'absolute necessity for making a new constitution regardless of the conditions.'

The aim for 'a President tied to a political party' prevents the congress from being labelled a 'Farewell Congress'. In his congress speech, Tayyip Erdoğan said, 'this is not a farewell. This is a rest, a break.' Thus it is both a 'farewell' and it is also a congress that shows that Tayyip Erdoğan's supervision of and relationship with the party will continue; the relationship will pour into a new mould and as such it is actually designed to construct 'continuity' rather than a farewell. It is understood that Tayyip Erdoğan takes the examples of Turgut Özal and Süleyman Demirel, who had been elected as Presidents by using the parliamentary majorities of their parties, very seriously. After having been elected as President, the relationships of Turgut Özal with his Motherland Party and Süleyman Demirel with his Right Path Party were loosened, weakened and they could no longer rule over their parties. ANAP (Motherland Party) swayed towards the control of Mesut Yılmaz, who was in opposition to Turgut Özal, and Right Path Party swayed towards the control of Tansu Çiller, who did not act as a dependent of Demirel.

It has become evident from the congress that, having learned from the past experiences of the centre-right parties, Tayyip Erdoğan wants to secure his future and plans to be elected by the public within a semi-Presidential system similar to that of France, and also wishes to continue to exert his control over the AK Party.

For Tayyip Erdoğan to become a publicly elected 'President tied to a political party' with increased powers in 2014, constitutional changes are required. The need for a new constitution comes into play at this very point.

Likewise, the fact that the new President will be elected in 2014 with a minimum of 50+ per cent of the vote for the first time in history renders Erdoğan's every word and every move for the next two years as 'strategic manoeuvres' tied to his ambitions for the Presidential elections.

Looking at the current balances of power in Turkey and the periodical data, whilst it is believed that due to the strong political power monopoly that the Prime Minister and AK Party Chairman has gathered in his person, he does not have any obstacles in front of him until 2014, the tone, style and contents of the speech delivered by the current President, Abdullah Gül, on 1 October at the opening of the new legislative year of the TGNA, right after the congress, showed that Erdoğan's path to presidency will not be as obstacle-free and easy as it may first appear. Thus a new difficulty was added to the forecasts and predictions of Turkey's future.

The fact that the AK Party has formed a government at every election, its increasing vote share, and the failure of the opposition party to form an alternative power, either by itself or within a coalition, left no checks and balances against Tayyip Erdoğan. Over the years he has gained and preserved the undisputed and unrivalled number one position within the AK Party. Abdullah Gül is seen as the only exception to this.

After the 2002 elections, because Tayyip Erdoğan was banned and excluded from Parliament, Gül had formed the first AK Party government as Prime Minister. In March 2003 he left his seat to Tayyip Erdoğan and instead became Foreign Secretary after Erdoğan's ban was lifted so that he could participate in elections and enter parliament. Gül, who had played an equal role to that of Tayyip Erdoğan in founding the AK Party, and showed the

virtue of leaving the Prime Minister's seat to Erdoğan, was seen as the only person who had the authority, personality and political career to balance Tayyip Erdoğan when needed between 2003-2007. In addition, Abdullah Gül's Presidential position, which he has held since 2007, meshed well with his personality, and had become the only 'checks and balances' upon Tayyip Erdoğan, when needed.

While not playing such a role deliberately, Abdullah Gül became the major name upon which the opposition, which has accumulated against Tayyip Erdoğan, has focused. Furthermore, the perception that Tayyip Erdoğan's close circle had started to see him as Erdoğan's rival and therefore tried to eliminate him in the future by pushing the boundaries of respect, started to spread within public opinion. At a time when these rumours and the connected perception became widespread, the Constitutional Court ruled that Abdullah Gül could become a Presidential nominee one more time as part of its judgment concerning a judicially controversial Presidential nomination condition and term of presidency. Thus Abdullah Gül, again by himself, gained 'legal leverage' against those who want to by-pass and eliminate him, and also Tayyip Erdoğan, over them.

For all of these reasons, attention was drawn by some parts of Abdullah Gül's speech on 1 October, which was known to have been prepared well in advance with diligence, for being different to Tayyip Erdoğan's and even viewed as a 'warning' to him. President Abdullah Gül's speech, even though it cannot yet be said with certainty, was interpreted as having sown the seeds of a potential Gül-Erdoğan dispute and differentiation.

The issues that set Gül apart from Erdoğan showed themselves in five major issues and points in his speech:

1. In relation to the sphere of discussion for the Kurdish problem and the manner in which to tackle BDP, Gül showed that he very much differs from Erdoğan in terms of style and content by using the following words:

*'It is my belief that everyone who has legally participated in the country's elections, voted for by the people, and won the right to carry the title of a member of parliament, should be a part of the legislative activities of this Assembly until a final judgment has been passed. This honourable parliament is where all issues of our country and our people can be resolved. It is important that all ideas and colours in the country are represented here. It is important that this honourable institution be all encompassing and that those whose views diverge from the majority find a safe place under this roof. Any missing element in the composition of this Assembly will serve no other purpose than that of repeating the practices of the past and delaying the much-needed solutions at this time even further.'*

Here Abdullah Gül reminds us of when the DEP (Democracy Party), a predecessor to BDP, deputies (Leyla Zana, Hatip Dicle, Orhan Doğan, Selim Sadak, Sırrı Sakık and Ahmet Türk) were stripped of their parliamentary deputy status and imprisoned after having been collected from the TGNA. This event made it even more difficult to resolve the Kurdish problem in Turkey and it belongs to a period that coincides with bloody developments.

2. In contrast to the AK Party Congress, where Turkey's relationship with the Islamic world and the Arab countries was very prominent whilst the European dimension was fully and almost wilfully ignored, Abdullah Gül gave the European Union (EU) an important place in his speech. On this he said the following:

*'It is true that the prospective for EU membership has added impetus to the reforms implemented in Turkey to strengthen the economy and our democracy, raising the standards of living for our people. Although the process has slowed down, due mostly to reasons that have to do with the other party, we must continue to do what we must and be determined to take the right steps in line with the Acquis.'*

Contrary to the claim for leadership of Islam and the Middle East that draws the attention to Tayyip Erdoğan, Abdullah Gül feels the need to put an emphasis on Turkey's European perspective.

3. President Gül also mentioned the constitution, and here he made it be felt that he takes a different approach to the constitution than that desired by Tayyip Erdoğan. Here are parts of President Gül's speech on the constitution:

*'...We must enact a new citizenship contract through a freedom based constitution that guarantees rights and freedoms for all and does not exclude anyone. In this process, the discussion of many issues and different constitutional systems and their advantages and disadvantages is a healthy discussion. At*

*the end of the day we must, as soon as possible, prepare a constitution that will advance our nation; expand fundamental rights and institutionalise our democracy.'*

What is striking is that Abdullah Gül elaborates on the need for the new constitution to expand fundamental rights and freedoms without making any references to the powers of the President and constitutional regulations such as Presidential or semi-Presidential systems.

4. Another aspect of President Abdullah Gül's speech, which clearly sets him apart from Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan, is the special emphasis he puts on freedom of thought and speech, which he did by way of embarking from writers and journalists. While reactions against Tayyip Erdoğan, especially by European offices and institutions, for engaging in harsh polemics with journalists and criticising him for having a large number of journalists arrested have been intensifying, the fact that President Gül makes a reference to this issue and the language that he uses is very different. In fact, the contrast with the prime minister's language and attitude is stark. Gül's words on this issue are as follows:

*'In our country today, everyone may freely express their views. If there are shortcomings or wrong practices or instances that harm our democracy, then these must all be removed without delay... Countries where democratic rights and freedoms are more fully exercised hardly ever run into difficulty. On the other hand, countries with few rights and freedoms and that are not democratic suffer most...*

*The reputation of a country grows when its writers, thinkers and opinion leaders are able to share their views without fear. In the same way, it is fundamental that journalists, newsmen and members of the media as a whole should face no obstacle in fulfilling their responsibility for informing the public. No one should be imprisoned because of expressing his or her views through the media. A clear distinction must be observed between those who incite violence and those who express an opinion.'*

5. Abdullah Gül also mentioned the economy in his speech and used language which showed that he sided with Minister Ali Babacan who, according to the latest press leaks, represents one of the two different tendencies within the government in terms of which priority to adopt for the economy. Ali Babacan has for years been recognised as chiefly responsible for the successful management of the Turkish economy and his name is used synonymously with fiscal discipline. Gül's words on this issue have been described as an implicit warning to the prime minister over the economy, and also seen as an indicator of the spreading of the differences between the two personalities across a wide spectrum. Gül's warning words regarding the economy in his speech are as follows:

*'It should not be forgotten that fiscal and monetary discipline are important reasons behind the economic achievements so far. It should be remembered that any slackening in this area would lead to irreparable damage. Additionally, we must pay a lot of attention to*

*our priorities in public spending at this critical time.'*

By replying, 'I do not wish to engage in a polemic with the President. However, we think differently,' when asked for his comments after President Abdullah Gül's TGNA opening speech, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan gave the message that he did not wish to enter into a conflict whilst admitting the fact that their differences in opinion can be no longer concealed.

How this difference in opinion will be reconciled, whether it will be reconciled, how the relations between these two important and prominent personalities will continue and whether and how they will be able to reconcile their political calendars without colliding with each other under the impact of Turkish, regional and international dynamics will be foremost among the major issues that will occupy Turkey for the next two years.

Autumn 2012 has been interesting in terms of making this issue clear.

Thus it has been demonstrated that a great deal may be learned about Turkish politics in the near future by looking out for two names, Abdullah Gül and Tayyip Erdoğan.