Post-Election Turkey

Istanbul Policy Center–Sabancı University–Stiftung Mercator Initiative and the Centre for Turkey Studies (CEFTUS) organized a roundtable meeting entitled “Post-Election Turkey” on Friday, January 15, 2016. The meeting elaborated on Turkey’s domestic dynamics and foreign policy following the last elections. This event is continuation of two meetings held in the British Parliament, London on November 17-18, 2015.

The meeting was composed of two sessions starting with the framing speeches followed by an active discussion of its participants. In the morning session of the meeting, Lord William Wallace (Liberal Democrat Peer and Former Government Whip in the House of Lords), Lord Peter Hain (Former Labour Cabinet Minister), and Ersin Kalaycıoğlu (Senior Scholar at IPC and Professor at Sabancı University) shared their thoughts on the election results, domestic dynamics, and the discussions on new constitution making in Turkey. The session was moderated by Bill Park (Senior Lecturer in the Defence Studies Department at King’s College, Visiting Scholar, TOBB-ET University).

The second session was moderated by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Senem Aydın-Düüzgit (Senior Scholar at IPC, Jean Monnet Chair in the Department of International Relations at Istanbul Bilgi University) and comprised keynote speeches by Dilek Kurban (Marie Curie Fellow at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin, Co-Chair of the Dahrendorf working group ‘Europe and Turkey’), Prof. Dr. Fuat Keyman (Director of IPC) and Dr. Bill Park on the Kurdish question, regional dynamics and foreign policy. Beside the speakers, academics, students, NGOs, and the media representatives contributed to the discussions resulting in a fruitful illumination of the subject.

The outcome of the election, domestic dynamics and the new constitution

After the introduction of Prof. Dr. Fuat Keyman, Dr. Bill Park moderated the first session on the election results, domestic dynamics, and the discussions on new constitution making in Turkey.

Lord William Wallace presented his impressions on how people in the UK perceive Turkey and their multiple images of Turkey. The Arab Spring is perceived positively as the Gezi protests in Turkey are seen as a part of the uprisings. Turkey’s attitude towards ISIL and the Kurds is rather perceived negatively. In general, the UK has become more cautious with countries which want to join the EU. Explaining UK’s concerns over the Kurdish question, Lord Wallace indicated that the way the UK had handled its experience with Irish, Scottish or Welsh nationalism may be an example of rapprochement with the Kurds.

According to Lord Peter Hain, Turkey may have a crucial role in the Middle East. People in the UK criticize Turkey because of the undermining human rights, attacks on the media, the current form of Sunni-sectarianism, and the abandonment of the ceasefire between the Turkish government and the PKK. Comparing the Kurdish question with the Irish case in the UK, Lord Hain mentioned that negotiations between the IRA and the British government took place in a non-military, political fashion. Geopolitically speaking, Turkey inherits a crucial role in its region in the Middle East and could function as a non-sectarian force between the Sunni and Shiites in the region. For him, Turkey could and will play an important role to bring stability and peace to the region, however, only if the government moves towards adopting a non-sectarian policy, both internally to his opponents and externally to the region.

Prof. Dr. Ersin Kalaycıoğlu indicated that current debates in Turkey are affected by three incidents that occurred in 2013: (1) the Gezi Park protests; (2) the revelations by the police and financial authorities uncovered corruptionist entanglements of ministers and
their families on December 17, 2013; and (3) the failures in foreign policy. Moreover, Prof. Kalaycıoğlu added that the local elections campaign was characterized by a utilization of the media by the AKP; which is also evident in the OECD report that the elections were not fair. Turkey's military forces seem to have moved to a major confrontation with the PKK beginning in March 2015 and climaxed by July. The conflict within the country caused the AKP's change of priorities from economics to security. Prof. Kalaycıoğlu predicts that an amendment of the constitution, being voted in a referendum, may be used by the AKP to reimpose its own way of presidentialism.

Kurdish question, regional dynamics and foreign policy

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Senem Aydın-Düzgit moderated the second session on the Kurdish question, regional dynamics, and foreign policy.

Dr. Bill Park stated that the Kurdish political movement has become segmented and lacks unification due to the disparate policies of the PKK and the HDP. Dr. Park continued with a comparison with the Scottish case in the UK and added that whereas Scottish culture has been incorporated by British culture and a British umbrella identity, Turkish nationalism was not fabricated to include ethnic and cultural diversity within its identity. For him, there has never happened a real peace process in Turkey because the process lacks the concepts like self-determination, decentralization, autonomy or federalism. Additionally, Turkish nationalism seems to be an obstacle to meet demands by the Kurds.

Prof. Keyman emphasized that in the beginning of the peace process, the shift from conflict to politics was undertaken; however, since the elections on June 7, 2015, it has evolved into the contrary. The HDP was an optimal opportunity to politically negotiate the Kurdish question between the PKK and the Turkish government. The current development in the Middle East regarding ISIL must be taken seriously because of the conditions due to the failed states in Syria and Iraq. Failed state structures promote the dissemination of ISIL. With regards to the refugee situation, it has to be mentioned that states like the US, Russia, Iran or Saudia Arabia which have geopolitical interests in the region have not experienced flows of refugee migration. These circumstances gave rise to the PKK's determination to focus on conflict rather than a political resolution.

Dilek Kurban elaborated on the attempts to provide a solution in the Kurdish question as well as on the historical roots of the Kurds' recognition as Kurdish citizens or their cultural recognition. Kurban criticized the deficiency of no legal framework in the peace process which resembles to the governmental approach in other areas, such as the Alevi Opening, which also lacked a legal footing. The reform process in Turkey as part of the EU accession process provided a shift from legal perspective to political approach regarding the Kurdish question as it became an issue of the Turkish parliament. Kurban explained that the south-eastern region of Turkey has been ignored considering the implementation of martial law or emergency law. According to Dilek Kurban, the HDP, the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan have gained legitimacy because the Turkish political establishment conceded. On the other hand, the discourse of the AKP and the media coverage have a significant impact on how Turkish society perceive the current political climate and the Kurdish question in general.

Prof. Keyman finished the panel thanking to CEFTUS, Sabancı University, the participating civil society members and the others.