



Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

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Turkey's charismatic Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has had some impressive achievements, both domestically and in the international sphere, but has also been a controversial figure particularly for his attitude towards religion and for his sometimes intemperate outbursts. This note looks at Erdoğan's personal and professional profile in an attempt to unmask the new path of Turkey from Kemalist-elitist to 'Non-threatening Muslim'/mass politics.

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1 Introduction

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the declared leader of a new political experiment of ‘non-threatening Islam’ by many authorities, is the subject of close scrutiny from the secular Turkish elite and the army, the EU, the US and the Islamic world.

Since his election as the Turkish Prime Minister, Erdoğan has notched up some impressive achievements. His domestic support has grown considerably: his party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP-Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi), won the 2002 and 2007 elections with an increased share of vote in the latter, and in the 2009 local elections received a nationwide majority of votes. His persistence towards Turkey’s EU accession, his active role in the Middle East peace process, and his efforts in restoring troubled Turco-Armenian relations have certainly raised Turkey’s international profile. Some leaders have proclaimed that Turkey’s new leadership and especially Erdoğan can be the start of a new era between the east and west with Turkey playing a peace-broker role thanks to its Muslim identity and democratic principles. But others have expressed concerns about the secularity of Turkey under Erdoğan. There are suspicions that in turning more populist at home and more eastward in its foreign policy, Turkey’s claim to a unique synthesis of Islam and democracy is under threat.

This note looks at the personal and professional profile of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in an attempt to unmask the new path of Turkey from Kemalist/elitist (the strongly secular westward facing path that Turkey had followed for most of the 20th century, set by Kemal Atatürk, the first president of the Turkish Republic) to ‘Non-threatening Muslim’/mass politics.

2 Personal Life

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was born on 6 February 1954 to a Georgian family who had migrated from Batumi, Georgia to the north-eastern Turkish city of Rize. Erdoğan was born in the Kasimpasa district of Istanbul, a less-than-affluent neighbourhood known for its macho honour code. Erdoğan has been publicly proud to be one of the Kasimpasa men, who are characterized as very hot-tempered, very proud and blunt in word.¹

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan spent most of his childhood in Rize where his father was a member of the Turkish coast guard. As a teenager, he came back to Istanbul where he sold sesame bread and lemonade in rough districts of Istanbul to earn extra money for his family.²

Brought up in a religious Muslim family, Erdoğan started his academic life in a religious school (Religious Vocational High School—tr. *Imam Hatip Lisesi*). These schools were established to raise imams following the abolishment of madrasas by the Unification of Education Act of 1924 as a part of Kemalist reforms. “In high school Erdoğan became known as a fiery orator in the cause of political Islam”.³ After high school, he attended Marmara University where he obtained a bachelor’s degree in Business Administration.⁴

Growing up, Erdoğan played semi-professional football in the local club Kasımpaşa FC which later gave his name to the stadium.

¹ "Behind the Turkish Prime Minister's Outburst at Davos", *TIME Magazine*, 30 January 2009

² "Turkey's Charismatic Pro-Islamic Leader", *BBC*, 4 November 2002

³ "Recep Tayyip Erdoğan", *Britannica Online Encyclopaedia*, retrieved 24 November 2009

⁴ "Life Story", *AKP Party Official Website*, February 2007, retrieved 1 December 2009

Erdoğan is married to Emine Erdoğan and the couple has two sons (Ahmet Burak, Necmeddin Bilal) and two daughters (Esra, Sümeyye). Although not very active in politics, Emine Erdoğan found herself under the spotlight by wearing the hijab as the first lady of a secular country. While this controversy raised questions about the influential effects on the public of having a religious couple at the core of politics, Erdoğan has insisted that his marriage actually represents the tolerance in Turkey. He explained in a speech in New York on 10 December 2006 that he had gladly married a woman who is of Arab ancestry and originally from a different Muslim denomination (Shafi'i/Ash'ari).⁵

3 Political Career

3.1 Early political career

Erdoğan has been politically very active since his youth. During his high school and university years he was a member of the Turkish National Students' Union. His political career started when he was elected president of the Beyoğlu Youth Branch of the National Salvation Party (MSP—Milli Selamet Partisi), an Islamist political party in 1970s that was closed down after the 1980 military coup. Later that year he became the president of the Istanbul Youth Branches of the same party. During the 1980 military coup, he worked as an accountant and later on as a manager in the private sector.⁶ He returned to politics in 1983 when the Welfare Party (RP-Refah Partisi) was established and a year later he became the Beyoğlu District Chairman of the party. In 1985, Erdoğan was appointed to the Provincial Chairman post for the Istanbul region of the Welfare Party. As the provincial chairman, Erdoğan urged all segments of the society to show an interest in the country's politics and vote. His campaign succeeded and secured very high voter turnout for the 1989 local elections.

In the next local elections in 1994, he was elected the mayor of Istanbul.⁷ During his term as the mayor, he secured the support of lower socio-economic groups by allocating municipal funds to poorer neighbourhoods. However, this action resulted in two distinct reactions. While the lower socio-economic groups appreciated him and declared him a 'Robin Hood' of Turkey, the Kemalist segment of society started to criticise him harshly on the grounds of his ad-hoc spending spree. At the same time, Erdoğan's religious inclinations started to become more and more apparent in his discourse. In press coverage that was published by the Turkish newspaper *Milliyet* on 21 November 1994, Erdoğan was quoted saying "Praise be to God, we are for shari'a" ("Elhamduillah seriyatciyiz").⁸ The BBC noted that his decision to ban alcohol in city cafes did not please secularists.⁹

In 1997, the Welfare Party was shut down by the Turkish Constitutional Court on the grounds of threatening the Kemalist nature of Turkey, especially secularity.¹⁰ Erdoğan, as a prominent mayoral figure, became a constant speaker at the demonstrations held by his colleagues from the banned party. In a speech on 12 December 1997 in the Eastern Turkish city of Siirt, Erdoğan identified Turkish society as having 'two fundamentally different camps'—those who follow Atatürk's reforms [secularists] and the Muslims who unite Islam with Shari'a.¹¹ In the same speech, Erdoğan recited a poem from the Ottoman Islamist poet Ziya Gökalp which

⁵ "Background of the New Cabinet", *Milliyet*, 29 August 2007

⁶ "Recep Tayyip Erdogan", *Erdogan's Personal Website*, 2006, retrieved 30 November 2009

⁷ "Life Story", *AKP Party Official Website*, February 2007, retrieved 30 November 2009

⁸ "Religion Related Debates Were Not Handled Well", *Milliyet*, 16 April 2007

⁹ "Turkey's Charismatic Pro-Islamic Leader", *BBC*, 4 November 2002

¹⁰ *Barry M. Rubin*, "Political Parties in Turkey", 2002, p 68

¹¹ *Barry M. Rubin*, "Political Parties in Turkey", 2002, p 68

resulted in a ten-month prison term. The poem included the lines: “The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets and the faithful our soldiers...” which were regarded as a violation of Kemalist principles by judges.¹² As a result, he was removed from the office of mayor of Istanbul. Although he was sentenced to a ten-month prison term, he served only four between March and July 1999.

Unsatisfied with the then range of parties, Erdoğan founded the Justice and Development Party (AKP—Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) on 14 August 2001. He was subsequently elected Founding Chairman of the party. Before the national elections in 2002, he was barred by the Turkish Electoral Board from running for elections because of his past conviction. However, after his party’s win at the polls, the constitution was modified to enable him to run in a by-election on 9 March 2003 from the Siirt constituency, his wife’s hometown, thus allowing him to enter parliament and take over the post of Prime Minister from Abdullah Gül, his deputy who had served as prime minister since November 2002.¹³

3.2 Erdoğan as the Prime Minister of Turkey

With Erdoğan as Prime Minister, the Turkish approach to a variety of issues has changed, but this has received mixed feedback from the public as well as international society. Commentators argue that, while on the one hand Turkey’s profile has notably risen in the international arena thanks to Erdoğan and his diplomatic work, his domestically popular yet internationally criticised policies have closed some doors for the Turkish Republic.

Foreign Policy

Erdoğan as prime minister has been instrumental in developing the new concepts that are emerging in Turkish foreign policy. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his current minister of foreign affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, have argued that the new benchmark of the republic’s foreign policy was ‘strategic depth’, also the title of an influential book by Davutoğlu. According to this concept, a nation’s value in world politics is predicated on its geo-strategic location and historical depth. Following this logic, Turkey is uniquely endowed both because of its location in geopolitical areas of influence, particularly its control of the Bosphorus, and because of its historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁴ It was argued that Turkish foreign policy had been unbalanced, with an overemphasis on ties with Western Europe and the US to the neglect of Turkey’s interest with other countries, especially in the Middle East.¹⁵ This concept has also provided other pillars of Erdoğan’s new foreign policy including the new concept of ‘zero problems with neighbours’. Erdoğan argues that Turkey should restore its strategic depth by combining its military and economic force with its cultural soft power.¹⁶

Thus, under Erdoğan’s leadership, Turkey has followed a much more active foreign policy in which EU accession remains a top priority while a more predominant role is given to brokering peace in the Middle East and in the Caucasus. Turkey, with Erdoğan, has for instance tried to use its Muslim identity with its military potential to broker a Syrian-Israeli peace. Similarly, Erdoğan’s personal persistence and efforts to moderate the nuclear-related political turmoil between the West and Iran has come about under the new doctrine of the Turkish foreign policy. In turn, this bridge status between Turkey’s Western partners—the US

¹² “Turkey’s Charismatic Pro-Islamic Leader”, *BBC*, 4 November 2002

¹³ “Erdoğan named as Turkish PM”, *BBC*, 23 March 2003

¹⁴ “Learning Strategic Depth: Implications of Turkey’s New Foreign Policy Doctrine”, *Insight Turkey*, July 2007

¹⁵ “Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalist Foreign Policy”, *Zaman*, 22 September 2008

¹⁶ For a series of articles about Turkish soft power see *Insight Turkey* Vol10 No.2 2008

and the EU-- and its Eastern partners—the Middle East, the Caucasus, the Caspian etc.—has brought benefits to both sides and may provide a map for Turkey's future foreign policy.¹⁷

This shift in Turkish foreign policy has notably turned the focus of international society towards Ankara:

Turkish foreign policy rarely makes global headlines, nor has it traditionally been an important factor in international politics in the 21st century. However, the events of September 11th, 2001, the American-led War on Terror, Second Gulf War, and the most recent domestic political turmoil have refocused world attention on Turkey's future path and progress. The nation's history and experience with democracy, secularism, Islamic fundamentalism, and ethnic minorities present a microcosm of the challenges facing its entire neighborhood. For the last several decades, Turkey, with its strict adherence to maintaining stability and the status quo in its region, has been trying to adjust to a world where conditions for traditional foreign policy making have been undergoing a radical change. Today Turkey stands at the threshold of all major trends within its neighborhood and is actively seeking to harness the assets that its geography and historical experiences afford it in its foreign and national security policy.¹⁸

Some commentators have argued that it was the creation of this 'new' Turkish policy that made the need for a reconciliatory bridge position between the West and East appear. By assuring both sides that Ankara has historical and current interest in the region's politics, Erdoğan has created manoeuvring room for Turks. Therefore, while Turkey has started to pursue economic and political benefits in regionally distinct projects—for instance the EU and Union for Mediterranean—it has also been calculating extra benefits that can be acquired through connecting both regions. For example, Turkey already has natural gas pipelines connecting Russia to Europe and the Middle East to the Caucasus, which guarantee its gas supplies through separate projects from the East and the West. But under Erdoğan it nonetheless brought about a new project, namely the Nabucco pipeline project to bring Caspian gas to Europe. This has strengthened Turkey's hand vis-à-vis its application to join the EU. Moreover, by presenting Turkey as fundamental for diversifying gas exports of the Caspian and the rest of Central Asia, Ankara has effectively seduced the East into putting its support behind this project. Therefore, Erdoğan, with the help of his entourage, has notably increased Turkey's profile in the international arena.

However, Erdoğan's actions in the foreign policy arena are not without criticism. Firstly, it has been said that the new alliance structure of Turkey and a more active policy between the east and the west could prove costly for Ankara. For example, Azerbaijan has already raised concerns about the Turco-Armenian diplomatic relationship and the implications of this in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It has also implied that it can shift its stance in the Nabucco project as well as in the price structure of gas exports to Turkey if it is not happy with Turkey's position.¹⁹

Moreover, some commentators have argued that Erdoğan's personality has had negative reflections on the Turkish politics: "Mr Erdoğan is said to speak no foreign languages and to know little about the outside world".²⁰ His tendency towards intemperate outbursts has also been criticised. For example, the neutral position that Turkey has been holding in the Arab-

¹⁷ See for instance Rt Hon Michael Ancram QC MP, "Turkey: a New Bridge in a Network World?", *Global Strategy Forum*, 2009

¹⁸ "Learning Strategic Depth: Implications of Turkey's New Foreign Policy Doctrine", *Insight Turkey*, July 2007

¹⁹ Gareth Winrow, "Turkey, Russia and the Caucasus: Common and Diverging Interests", *Chatham House*, November 2009

²⁰ "Turkey's Charismatic Pro-Islamic Leader", *BBC*, 4 November 2002

Israeli conflict has allowed Turkey to engage in a military partnership with Israel whilst holding good economic and cultural relations with its historical Arab allies. However, Erdoğan's personal criticisms about Shimon Perez, which were vocalized in an exasperated manner at the World Economic Forum in Davos on 29 January 2009, have already damaged the strategic partnership with Israel.²¹ While boasting that it is the broker of Middle Eastern peace, Ankara has ended up excluding Israel from a planned NATO military exercise.²² The action was strongly criticised by the US, a very important Turkish military and economic partner. It is also interesting to note that the Davos forum took place two months before the 29 March 2009 Turkish local elections. Foreign policy analysts have argued that Erdoğan's outburst was intended to secure domestic support at a time when the economic crisis was coupled with the failure to get any tangible update on the EU accession. Appearing once again as the Turkish Robin Hood, Erdoğan seemed to be protecting the rights of Turkey's Muslim friends in the Middle East, which gave contributed to his party gaining a very high nation-wide majority (40% while the runner-up CHP had only 28%).²³ Therefore, it is safe to argue that Erdoğan's personal actions have had mixed feedback from the international and domestic society.

Domestic Arena

It is perhaps easier to understand the reflection of Erdoğan's personal profile on Turkish politics in domestic issues than in foreign policy. Turkey has seen his influence in a variety of issues.

National and Local Elections

Erdoğan's charisma proved itself strong following the results of 2002 and 2007 national elections, and further, that of 2009 local elections.

On 3 November 2002 Turkey's fifteenth national elections were held. They were won by Erdoğan's AKP, producing a crushing majority in spite of their winning only 34% of the national vote.²⁴ Since not all parties previously elected to parliament won enough votes to re-enter the Grand National Assembly, the AKP's share of the national vote allowed them to have majority of the seats in the parliament. The only other political party that was able to survive the 10% parliamentary threshold was the Republican People's Party (CHP-*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*). The election produced Turkey's first single-party government since 1987 and the country's first two-party parliament in 48 years. The election was widely interpreted by commentators as a protest vote against the corruption-riddled traditional forces of Turkish politics, especially parties²⁵ forming the failed coalition. It reflected the soaring popularity of the AKP, established barely a year before, and prompted a number of established party leaders to resign.

The next national elections were held on 22 July 2007 when Erdoğan's party not only emerged as victorious but also notably increased its share of the national vote (47%).²⁶ This percentage allowed Erdoğan to form another single-party government in his second national elections. Although the share of seats for the AKP in the parliament decreased as more

²¹ "[Stormy Debate in Davos over Gaza](#)", *Al Jazeera*, 30 January 2009

²² "Turkey excludes Israel", *CNN*, 11 October 2009

²³ "Ruling Party Main Loser in Local Ballot", *Hurriyet*, 30 March 2009

²⁴ [2002 Elections Results](#), *Electionresources.org*, retrieved 3 December 2009

²⁵ DSP (Demokratik Sol Partisi—centre of left), MHP (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi—nationalist right wing party), ANAP (Anavatan Partisi—centre of right party)

²⁶ [The Grand Assembly of Turkey](#), retrieved 3 December 2009

parties overcame the 10% threshold—CHP²⁷ 20.8%, MHP 14.3%, DP²⁸ 5.4% etc.—authorities acknowledged that it was remarkable for a recently established political party to form single-party governments two terms in a row. Moreover, the Turkish electoral board confirmed that the voter turnout was almost 80%, an all-time high.²⁹ Thus, Erdoğan's tactic of integrating all segments of the society into Turkish politics was succeeding, as Turkey started to take its turn from elitist to mass politics.

The most recent Turkish local elections, which took place on 29 March 2009, were another victory for Erdoğan's AKP, albeit not as big as national ones. The AKP's share of votes dropped down to approximately 40%, while the main opposition party CHP notable increased its share.³⁰ Although victorious in the national level, the drop of the votes resulted in a failure to win in previously targeted constituencies such as Izmir and Diyarbakir, the former a Kemalist and the latter a predominantly Kurdish-populated city. However, Erdoğan still courted controversy with his comments about Urfa, a south-eastern Turkish city: "We would win, even if our jacket ran for elections" (*Ceketimizi koysak ortaya kazanırız*). Local voters punished him by supporting other parties in the elections.³¹

Presidential Elections

Turkey's 2007 presidential elections, although won by Erdoğan's AKP, demonstrated some of his controversial character. The president of Turkey, according to the 1982 constitution, is elected by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. This was due to happen in late April 2007, before the tenth president Ahmet Necdet Sezer's term expired on 16 May 2007. Speculations that Erdoğan might be running for the post triggered massive public protest in Turkey. On 14 April 2007, two days before the presidential candidate nomination by parliamentary parties, over 300,000 protesters marched in the centre of Ankara, chanting slogans such as "Turkey is secular, and it will remain secular", and "We don't want an imam for president" to protest against the possibility of Erdoğan or another member of the AKP running in the presidential elections.^{32,33} A second rally was organized on 29 April 2007 opposing the candidacy of Abdullah Gül, the current president.³⁴ During these elections approximately 1,000,000 people participated in the rally in defence of secularism, the largest protest of its kind in Turkish history.³⁵

The election nonetheless failed after the constitutional court declared the first round of voting invalid, on the grounds that a quorum of two thirds was necessary and not reached due to a boycott by opposition parties. Gül was re-nominated by the AKP on August 17 and elected president after three rounds, the last one taking place on 28 August 2007. However, Erdoğan's speech on national television as an attempt to answer Hurriyet newspaper's journalist Bekir Coşkun for his article entitled 'Not My President' was a major drawback for his public profile. Erdoğan said "The people who say that (Gül is not my president) must

²⁷ Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi—Republican People's Party

²⁸ Demokratik Parti—Democratic Party

²⁹ "2007 Elections", *Euractive*, 5 April 2007

³⁰ "Ruling Party Main Loser in Local Ballot", *Hurriyet*, retrieved 22 December 2009

³¹ "Siyaset, Rehavet ve Kehaneti Kaldırmaz", *Tumgazeteler*, 1 April 2009

³² "Turkey's Presidency Battle", *BBC*, 28 August 2007

³³ *Press Scan*, *Turkishpress.com*, retrieved 1 December 2009

³⁴ "Turkey Lines Up Presidential Poll", *BBC*, 10 August 2007

³⁵ "One Million Turks Rally Against Government", *Reuters*, 29 April 2007

renounce their citizenship”.³⁶ Coşkun, with his colleague Emin Çölaşan, was fired after the presidential elections.

After the elections, on 20 October 2007, a constitutional referendum on electoral reform took place. The main issue in the referendum was the proposition that the president of Turkish republic should be directly elected by popular vote rather than by a parliamentary one. Secular constituencies have argued that this was an attempt by Erdoğan to secure the next presidential post for himself or a member from his party. It would have meant that any political party possessing a nation-wide majority of votes—i.e. the AKP—would very probably have gained the presidential office as well.³⁷ Following a major backlash from the media and the secular segment of the society, electoral reforms were rejected by numerous cities and thus were not established.

Justice

On March 2006, the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors for the first time in Turkey’s history held a press conference and publicly protested about the obstruction of the appointment of judges to the high courts for over 10 months. It claimed Erdoğan wanted to fill the vacant posts with his own appointees. Because of this policy Erdoğan was accused of creating a rift with the Turkey’s highest court of appeals (*Yargıtay*) and high administrative court (*Danıştay*). Erdoğan claimed that the constitution gave the power of assigning members to his elected party.³⁸

In May 2007, the head of the highest court in Turkey asked prosecutors to consider whether Erdoğan should be charged over critical comments regarding the decision of the constitutional court over election of Abdullah Gül as president. Erdoğan said that the ruling was “a disgrace to the justice system” and prosecutors had already investigated his earlier comments, including that the decision had fired a “bullet at democracy”. Tülay Tuğcu, the head of the Turkish Constitutional Court, condemned Erdoğan for “threats, insults and hostility” towards the judicial system.³⁹

Kurdish Opening

Erdoğan’s initiative to end the Kurdish separatist insurgencies has also drawn a lot of attention. More than 45,000 people have been killed since 1984 when the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) picked up arms in Turkey’s Kurdish-populated eastern and south-eastern provinces, which subsequently led to the PKK being declared as a terrorist entity by Turkey, the EU and the US. Since August 2009, the government, under the leadership of Erdoğan, has been trying to build public support for an initiative to grant Kurds greater rights and try to erode the support for the PKK. Erdoğan has said that he was willing to break Turkish political taboos to end a war that has cost the country billions of dollars and hobbled its efforts to join the European Union.⁴⁰ Details of the Kurdish opening became clearer as the government released its plan to tackle the issue. According to this plan, the government is aiming to collect information from various resources, to consult opinions of media representatives, journalists and Kurdish intellectuals and lastly to draft a plan that was said to be shared with the public by Erdoğan.⁴¹ The draft plan will consist of a three-fold approach. In the short term,

³⁶ “İktidarın Bekir Coskun Yaniti”, *Hurriyet*, 26 August 2008

³⁷ “[Turkey Court Rules Reforms Valid](#)”, *BBC*, 5 July 2007

³⁸ “Rift Between Erdoğan and HSYK”, *BBC*, 30 May 2007

³⁹ “[Turkish Court Condemns Erdoğan](#)”, *BBC*, 30 May 2007

⁴⁰ “[PKK ‘peace envoy’ Crosses Border Into Turkey](#)”, *Hurriyet*, 4 December 2009

⁴¹ “[Details of Kurdish Opening Get Clearer](#)”, *Hurriyet*, 31 July 2009

Kurdish names of towns will be restored with certain minor legal changes in the classification of 'terrorists'. In the medium-term deeper legal changes will be made, especially in the Article 221 of the Turkish Penal Code, which deals with repentance for PKK members who were not involved in terrorist attacks. The third phase will relate to long-term impact, which will aim to make far-reaching legal changes, especially constitutional ones to promote Turkey's cultural diversity.

This project, which received considerable support from the EU and the Kurdish minority, has been harshly criticized by Turkish intellectuals and opposition leaders as being 'very ambiguous'. Turkish journalist Yusuf Kanlı stated the negative impact of the ambiguity:

The administrators of the country might wish to ignore it, but since the start of the still-ambiguous "Kurdish opening" that has gradually transformed into a "national unity and brotherhood project" the existing political polarization in Turkey has taken on a very dangerous dimension of alienating people from each other and, indeed, torpedoing both national unity and the brotherhood among members of the nation from different ethnic, religious or sectarian backgrounds.⁴²

Opposition parties in the parliament did not give any backing to the initiative on the grounds that it was "an opportunity to fan the head of Turkish nationalism instead of contributing to the solution of long-standing problem of the country".⁴³ Nationalist segments of the public have vocalised their discontent with the plan, saying that "too forgiving"⁴⁴. Some commentators argued that:

There are die-hard nationalists who border on racists who were ready to die for the national and territorial integrity of Turkey yesterday who now don't want to send their sons to the military. They say, "Why should my son die for the defence of the country if the government is so keen on having some secret deals with the terrorists and not only providing them a secret amnesty enabling them to escape from justice, but also allowing them to receive a hero's welcome as if they had won and Turkey had lost the fight."⁴⁵

This mixed feedback from domestic and international sources left Erdoğan's plan in limbo as on the one hand the EU heavily supports the opening and has declared it a step towards further compliance with the Copenhagen criteria, while on the other hand there is growing discontent in the public about the mandatory conscription with parents refusing to send their sons to army 'in vain'.

Headscarf Issue and Secularity

Due to Turkey's secular constitution, women are banned from entering government offices and schools wearing headscarves. When Erdoğan assumed office, Turkey's secular constituency and its generals—self-proclaimed protectors of Turkey's secular constitution—looked at his new-found moderation with suspicion as well as with certain fear because of the possibility of a constitutional change. However, Erdoğan has disavowed the hardline Islamic views of his past in the banned Welfare Party and is trying to recast himself as a pro-Western

⁴² Yusuf Kanlı, "Turkey: Seeking a Country in Peace", *Hurriyet*, 26 November 2009

⁴³ "Turkey: Who Is Ready for a Kurdish Solution?", *Plus News Pakistan*, 16 November 2009

⁴⁴ "Bahçeli'den Kurt Acilimi Tepkisi", *Tumgazeteler*, 25 July 2009

⁴⁵ Yusuf Kanlı, "Turkey: Seeking a Country in Peace", *Hurriyet*, 26 November 2009

conservative. Moreover, Erdoğan has avoided the sensitive issue of Islamic dress for women, even though his own wife, Emine, wears a headscarf.⁴⁶

However, some journalists like Yusuf Kanli argue that his failed bid to criminalise adultery and his attempts to introduce 'alcohol-free-zones' reveal his true intentions.⁴⁷ The prime minister responded to those criticism by asserting that he was committed to secularism, but he said that this should not be at the expense of Turks 'who want to express their religious beliefs more openly'.⁴⁸

Erdoğan's controversial comments

Some commentators have argued that the key to the Erdoğan's charisma lied in his self-presentation as 'one of the public'. His support for lower socio-economic classes of Turkey has received more positive feedback than previous attempts by others since much of the public actually see him as one of them. However, he has damaged this reputation with hot-tempered moments and comments on opposition leaders, NGO representatives and public. For example on 11 February 2006 Erdoğan went to the southern Turkish city of Mersin for a visit. Very badly hit by the economic crisis, a farmer went up to Erdoğan and asked him "What is going to happen to farmers? It has been hell for us (using the Turkish phrase "our mothers are weeping"). How dare you come here?" The response of the prime minister was harsh: he turned to the farmer and shouted "Then take your mom and get the hell out of here".⁴⁹ This was a major setback for Erdoğan who built his political career around the support of lower socio-economic stratum of the society.

His comments about democracy, such as "Democracy is like a tram, it's a means to the end and we will get off when we arrive at our station"⁵⁰, rendered pro-democratic constituencies very concerned about his future aims.

Lastly, Turks who support Kemalist principles and believe in the compatibility of Islam and secularity were deeply worried by comments such as "One cannot be both secular and Muslim. One has to choose either. If they are found together in the same milieu, they would repel each other like magnets with matching poles".⁵¹ These statements, because they came from the prime minister, were very controversial.

4 Conclusion

It is undeniable that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is a charismatic leader who is very popular at home and has effectively drawn the attention of the international society towards Turkey and Turkish politics. In the past decade Turkey has become more apparent in headlines as Ankara has assumed a more active foreign policy. Turkish efforts in brokering a peace accord between Israel and Syria, Russia and Georgia, Kurdistan Province and the Iraqi government did not go unnoticed as the EU and the US stressed the strategic importance of Turkey as a bridge between the East and the West. Nevertheless, it remains questionable how much of Turkey's success can be attributed to him rather than his political party, his

⁴⁶ "Profile: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan", *BBC*, 23 July 2007

⁴⁷ Yusuf Kanli, "Turkey: Seeking a Country in Peace", *Hurriyet*, 26 November 2009

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ "Basbakanin Anani da Al Git Dedigi Ciftciye Onlem" (Caution for the farmer that the PM insulted) , *Hurriyet*, 8 March 2009

⁵⁰ "Demokratik Tramvaylar?" (Democratic Trams?) , *Radikal*, 14 May 2005

⁵¹ "Erdogan: Millet Isterse Laiklik Tabii ki Gidecek" (Erdogan: If the public wants it, of course democracy will leave), *Hurriyet*, 21 August 2001

entourage etc. Erdoğan emerges as populist character who is able to reach the masses through his rhetoric and his religious stance. However, this has also been a major drawback for his popularity as he has often given the opposition something to attack him for. Nonetheless, Erdoğan has fascinated more than the Turkish public by boasting that the dominant Muslim identity of a state is not necessarily a reason for ignoring the West, but actually an exotic value that can be added to Western culture.