



After Davutgulo: Power Struggle in Turkey's Ruling Party

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Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu has announced that he will not be the candidate in the next party congress to be held on 22 May 2016 and will leave his post after the new prime minister candidate is elected by the party congress. The past few weeks, particularly after the June 2015 general election, differences between Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu had made headlines leading to speculations that a change of guard is becoming imminent. Davutoglu will become the fourth senior leader from the ruling Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AK) party to have fallen out with Erdogan after former president Abdullah Gul, former ministers Abdullatif Sener and Bulent Arinc having similar fate. The first major resignation was from former Finance Minister Abdullatif Sener who resigned in 2008 over dispute on economic policies,¹ and then came the resignation of Bulent Arinc who was the Speaker of the Parliament and Deputy Prime Minister till 2015. His opposition to Erdogan came mostly on issues of secret peace process with the Kurdish militants, and use of force against Gezi park protests.² Former President Abdullah Gul is leading a mostly apolitical life after retiring from the presidency, but his occasional media interactions send enough signals that he does not support Erdogan on several issues. Despite several efforts to mend ties, party factionalism is only on increase as the dissent voices have the support of these three leaders and the forced exit of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu will likely strengthen the anti-Erdogan camp within AKP.

Despite his close relations with the President, Davutoglu was the weakest among all other leaders. After all, Ahmet Davutoglu had never been a grassroots politician. He was brought by

Erdogan from his academy where he was supervising his PhD students. AKP's grassroots politicians had never complained about Erdogan's choice. Since his ascendance to the presidency in 2014, Erdogan's close aides were expecting that someone from among party's old guards or someone from the mother party, the Welfare Party, would replace Davutoglu. Numan Kurtulmus, the Deputy Prime Minister and many senior leaders from AKP were in the line for the top post. Davutoglu's selection for the post had surprised many within the party, but nobody came out in public against the decision.

The Rift

After June 2015 general elections, it became clear that AKP's internal dynamics would move very fast after the party faced its first ever electoral setback, only to recover in snap election in November 2015. Series of events started unfolding very rapidly when differences over the list of candidates for AKP's highest body, the Central Decision and Executive Board (CDAC) emerged in party congress held in September 2015 where the list prepared by Davutoglu was completely changed. Differences became more visible over the appointment of 15 provincial and district party leaders when 47 members of CDAC had ruled to remove Davutoglu's authority to appoint provincial officials on April 29. The decision showed his increasing isolation within party affairs.³ Davutoglu's decision not to seek re-election of party chairmanship in the next party congress was announced on 4 May, day after an unknown blog, "The Pelican Brief" (Pelikan Dosyası) published series of accusations against Davutoglu for his alleged anti-Erdogan decisions. The blog wrote:

Ladies! Gentlemen! This is a horrible country. This is a country where all of the superpowers are playing chess on Turkey. This country will not become a bed of roses in one day just by pacifying Ergenekon or scaring off the parallel structure. Even if you get rid of a traitor, they will immediately be replaced with a new one. They will not leave us by ourselves easily. If necessary, they will turn our own against us. So, keep your eyes open. Look around you, see what is going on. But look carefully. Don't look superficially. And see what I see.⁴

The blog went on accusing Davutoglu of having no 'B' plan for Syria and held him responsible for this failure. It read, "In practice, he had usually failed. He said, 'Esed (Bashar al-Assad) will be toppled in 6 months.' Not just said it, but also made his plans according to it. He did not have a B plan." Then, the list of accusations includes his alleged complicity with the West

and Europe with whom President Erdogan has a strained relationship. It accused him of doing very little to facilitate the presidential system. The unusual blog was written by someone very close to the President and had the clear aim of making a strong case for Davutoglu's upcoming exit from the party post as well as premiership.

The rift is a reminder of the 2001 crisis when Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Abdullah Gul, Bulent Arinc and Abdullatif Sener rose as the reformists in their Saadet Party against the party leader and Islamist leader Necmettin Erbakan. Both Erdogan and Gul were the rising stars of Saadet Party who had the blessings of party leader Erbakan. But they fell out of favour with the party leader after Abdullah Gul stood against Recai Kutan, going against the will of the party leader to challenge his nominee for party leadership. After losing the party election Abdulla Gul, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Bulent Arinc and Abdullatif Sener broke away from the party and formed their own party AKP. The young generation led by Gul and Erdogan was more inclined to adopt a moderate Islamic agenda, primarily lowering party's anti-West rhetoric. As a result, the AK party adopted a pro-EU politics, which would have given them a popular political agenda against its rivals. For Saadet leader Erbakan, the European Union was only a 'Christian Club' and a pro-west Turkey was unacceptable to him. Erdogan and Gul's pro-west tilt was unacceptable and the two factions broke away irreconcilably

Today, Erdogan appears to be assuming the same place as Erbakan was once holding in Saadet Party. Davutoglu is dubbed by pro-Erdogan party workers as "pro-West, EU", friend of Germans, etc. The way Erdogan is accusing his western partners in his regular speeches, mostly for their alleged betrayal on the Syrian crisis; the frustration is not just of Erdogan individually. The Turkish public opinion has grown anti-American in the past few years. According to Pew Research Center 2015 survey, only 29 percent Turks see the US favourably. Nearly half of Turks approve US actions against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.⁵

Erdogan vs. Davutoglu

What went wrong between the two long-time and trusted partners, which has brought them to the brink? From 2012 onwards, the AKP government has only acquired more problems than it had neutralized in its so called "Zero Problem Policy". Failure of peace process with Kurds, weakening economy, Syrian crisis, strained relations with Russia, Egypt and Israel, and mistrust between Turkey and its NATO allies are the key issues that have kept Turkey internally and externally

completely occupied. Davutoglu and Erdogan both are responsible for this situation and someone has to take responsibility for these failures. As the anti-Davutoglu blog says, he has to take much of the blame. AKP's response to the Syrian crisis was so visibly miscalculated that it has brought the country from 'zero problem' to 'all problems' zone where the Islamic State has infiltrated the Turkish society; the peace process with Kurdish militants has been derailed; the refugee crisis has put extra pressure on the economy and security and Turkey's newly found friendship with Russia had ended with huge mistrust.

Both Erdogan and Davutoglu have failed to get the Americans to accept Turkish calls for establishing a 'No Fly Zone' on Northern Syria or a Safe Zone for refugees, let alone the demands of thinking about a ground operation against the Islamic State in Syria. If Davutoglu has failed to do much on these fronts, there are not enough signs that the next Prime Minister can secure any breakthrough on these issues. In fact, the currently completed EU-Turkey refugee deal may also be withdrawn if the new Prime Minister fails to get visa free travel for Turkish citizens, a pre-condition from Turkey to implement the deal. Has Turkey's European Union project reached a frustrating line? What Erdogan has been telling his public over the EU-Turkey refugee deal was an indicator of how deeply Erdogan was frustrated with the deal. The ongoing anti Davutoglu debate includes allegations that Davutoglu's meetings with Western leaders have not yielded much on these issues. Davutoglu is being accused of being pro-west, which the anti-Erdogan political parties think was only at the behest of Erdogan.⁶ On the Syrian crisis, the AK party government had failed when Erdogan himself was the Prime Minister. His passionate campaign against Bashar al Assad was based on promises from his western partners, which were never realized to his expectations, particularly the implementation of No Fly Zone.

Domestic issues were rather more compelling in such a crisis. After repeated terrorist attacks attributed to PKK affiliated terrorists, Turkey declared an all out war against terrorism, vowing to completely disarm the PKK. This war, though it had support from ultra nationalist elements, was gradually extended to other political opponents including journalists and academicians. It is said that Davutoglu was not comfortable with the use of terror charges against media persons and academicians. Similarly, an ongoing campaign against 'parallel state', a charge used against individuals and institutions affiliated with the US based scholar Fethullah Gulen was not receiving enough support from Davutoglu, signalling the divide on the issue. And constitutional reforms and change towards the presidential system had become more important priority for the AK party to which Davutoglu was not seen as much enthusiastic.⁷

The AK Party's Dynamics

AK party's infight is not new, though it became more visible since the first ever electoral setback in June 2015 when Davutoglu was more inclined to form an alliance and pro-Erdogan deputies were in favour of having a new election to win a majority to go for a constitutional change.⁸ Perhaps, Erdogan would not welcome a situation the Motherland Party had undergone in the 1980s when the party faced huge setback after its charismatic leader, Turgut Ozal, became the President. And the party gradually disappeared from Turkey's electoral map.⁹

As the Central Decision and Executive Board (CDAC)¹⁰ has, for the first time, vetoed Prime Minister's bid to appoint provincial heads of the party, it is believed that the body, dominated by Erdogan loyalists, will remain active in the coming days as well. Davutoglu will remain an honorary member of party's highest body, the Grand Congress for life time, but he may not find enough support from within the party to assume any influential party position. As he has announced, he will remain active in political life.

The next extraordinary Grand Congress to be held on 22 May 2016, will elect the General Chairman and the members of the party's highest decision making body, the Central Decision and Administrative Committee (CDAC). Given the role of CDAC, whichever faction controls the CDAC, will control the party affairs. The Central Executive Board (CEC or MYK) is a lower body of the CDAC elected from among the members of the CDAC. The highest and most powerful organizational body, the Grand Congress, which elects party's higher leadership, is composed of members elected through a long chain of Town Congress, District Congress and City Congresses. The total number of elected delegates for the Grand Congress may not be higher than twice the number of all members of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. Names for the next party chairman will be forwarded by provincial heads, deputies, CDAC members and party founding members. There has been a practice to propose only one name before the Grand Congress and get him elected unanimously. As of now, these three bodies have strong support for President Erdogan and, hence, his choice for any appointment will remain the most important. As of now, there is no sign of a major divide over the issue of resignation of Ahmet Davutoglu and the election of a new Prime Minister candidate. Most of the members within CDAC and the Grand Congress will elect a leader without much dispute.

AKP's Decision Making Bodies

Headquarters Organization	Groups	City Organization	District Organization	Town Organization
Grand Congress More than 550 elected by various methods	The Founders' Committee	City Congress Delegates elected by DC not more than 600	District Congress 400 Delegates	Town Congress 100 Delegates
Chairman Elected by GC	Party's TBMM Group (all members of the parliament from the party)	City Chairman Elected by CC	District Chairman Elected by DC	Town Chairman Elected by TC
Central Decision and Administrative Committee (CDAC) 50 members elected by GC	Provincial Assembly Groups	City Administrative Committee (CAC) 20-50 members elected by CC	District Administrative Committee 7-30 members elected by DC	Town Administration Committee
Central Executive Committee (CEC) General Chairman, the Assistant General Chairmen, the General Secretary, and the Chairman and Deputy Chairmen of the Party's TBMM Group	Municipal Assembly Groups	City Executive Committee appointed by city chairman from among members of CAC	District Executive Committee Appointed by DC from among the member of DAC	Town Executive Committee

But the problem does not end here. Most of the founding leaders have either left the party or have assumed the non-partisan political roles. Erdogan's ability to dictate party affairs from his presidential palace is not limitless. To be in full control of party affairs, Erdogan needs to replace country's parliamentary system with a presidential system where the president will be constitutionally allowed to assume any post in the party, including the chairmanship.

What Next?

Though the leadership crisis that emerged after Davutoglu's forced resignation has been temporarily averted and delayed until a new election, AKP has come to a point where its internal affairs have quietly become external. The internal unrest is attracting public attention in a way that will make AKP more vulnerable to public pressure and electoral losses if the party faces its first split led by the members excluded by Erdogan.

What will happen after 22 May? The extraordinary congress will have to choose a Prime Minister candidate who would be running the government in perfect coordination with the President. The two options are: A "powerful President and powerful Prime Minister" or "powerful President and low profile Prime Minister" or a third option is to have a strong AK Party and a harmonious government according to Ahmet Unal, an AKP leader.

Among the most important candidates are the Minister of Transport, Maritime and Communication, Binali Yildirim; Minister of Justice, Bekir Bozdag; Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, Berat Albayrak, son-in-law of President Erdogan; Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus, and the ruling party's Vice Chairman, Mehmet Ali Sahin. Many of them are the founding members and former members of the Saadet Party. Perhaps, the Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus can emerge as the most agreeable leader among all these leaders, though Bekir Bozdag is known for his close proximity to Erdogan. Numan comes from the old Saadet Party where he still enjoys greater support and sympathy. His candidacy can consolidate electoral support from conservative supporters. First time parliamentarian, Berat Albayrak, son-in-law of Erdogan will face immense but a quite opposition because he is too young to bypass many senior leaders.

As of now, it seems unlikely that the party would face any split in near future until an early election is declared to which Erdogan is said to be opposed.¹¹ The upcoming party convention on 22 May will choose only the chairman as the last congress had already elected 50 members of CDAC in which many prominent faces including Mehmet Simsek, Besir Atalay and Sadullah Ergin had lost their seats.¹² Isolation and exclusion of many key founding members of the AKP from Erdogan dominated party may lead to unrest within party ranks. The most fearsome scenario for Turkey's growing economy and political stability is the split in AK party where the potential two factions have enough big names, such as former President Abdullah Gul,¹³ former

Minister Ali Babacan, former Minister Bulent Arinc, and other senior leaders like former Finance Minister Mehmet Simsek, former Deputy Prime Minister Besir Atalay, Sadullah Ergin and many others, who are seen on the opposing side of Erdogan.

Much of this scenario depends on 22 May Grand Congress when the party will finalize not only the candidate for prime minister but also his possible cabinet. If dissenting leaders were not properly accommodated, or Erdogan promotes his son-in-law Berat Albayrak, party dynamics will move towards new directions leading to a scenario similar to what Saadet Party had faced in 2001 when the young leaders had broken away to form a new party.

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The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes:

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⁸ "Turkey's AKP Party Struggles to Mend Internal Rift," 11 June 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/content/turkeys-akp-party-struggles-mend-internal-rift/2817473.html>.

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