Turkey in 2013: Will Erdogan shake up the region?

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It has been a decade since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in Turkey, and its achievements are certainly noteworthy. Since experiencing its worst economic crisis in recent history in 2001, Turkey has achieved sustainable, high growth rates. The AKP’s foreign policy, meanwhile, has been characterized by increasing activism, contributing to Turkey’s image as a rising regional power. The AKP has also dismantled the power of the military and judiciary, forces that frequently intervened in electoral politics. With the advent of the Arab uprisings, Turkey has promoted itself as a role model that combines democratic rule with Muslim piety.

Yet, the AKP democratizing agenda that was initially triggered by the EU accession process has gradually lost steam. As the AKP has consolidated its power, it has lost its appetite for addressing the demands of historically marginalized groups such as the Kurds and Alevis. Another casualty of the AKP’s overconfidence has been press freedom. In Reporters Without Borders’s Press Freedom Index, Turkey ranked 103th out of 173 countries in 2008. Now it is ranked 148th out of 179.

Still, the AKP will emerge victorious in 2014 local and presidential elections as long as it avoids a sharp economic downturn in 2013. Opposition parties lack the vision and resources to challenge the AKP’s political ascendancy even as Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan promotes some form of “presidentialism” to replace the current parliamentary system.

This year, the AKP faced two major challenges. The transformation of the Syrian uprising into a civil war symbolized the end of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s much touted “zero problems with the neighbors” policy. As the AKP put its weight behind the opposition, Turkey’s relations with Iran, Iraq and Russia came under increasing strain. Meanwhile, Kurdish insurgency-related violence has reached its highest levels since 1999. As the AKP adopted a more nationalist position, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), galvanized by the gains of the Syrian Kurds, intensified its attacks. These two issues – the violence in Syria and the Kurdish question – will continue to dominate Turkish politics in 2013.
While the al-Assad regime in Syria has lost control of large areas of Syria, the likelihood of an orderly transition of power there is slim. But the AKP’s real concern is the strong appeal of the PYD, a PKK affiliate, among the Syrian Kurds. The Syrian Kurds are dispersed and impoverished, and lack unity, international support and control over oil resources. Similar to the Iraqi Kurds, the Syrian Kurds are likely to seek Turkish patronage to counter Arab power. At the same time, the revitalization of Kurdish nationalism in Syria has galvanized Turkish Kurds, whose demands for greater rights and power continue to trouble the AKP government.

That said, despite this year’s spike in violence, the PKK is no position to militarily challenge the Turkish army in 2013, except in a few remote areas. But the government’s harsh law and order tactics, involving the imprisonment of thousands of Kurdish political activists, and an increasingly nationalistic discourse from Erdoğan, seem to be popular among large segments of the Turkish population. Indeed, Erdoğan seems to be content with a decline in support among Kurdish citizens as his nationalist credentials have bolstered his popularity among ethnic Turks. The AKP in 2013 will be hoping (unrealistically) that economic prosperity, newly offered cultural rights and repression of activism will decrease the appeal of Kurdish nationalism.

Looking ahead, a key aspect of the AKP’s Kurdish policy involves Turkey’s relations with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and a plan to export Kurdish oil and gas via a new pipeline. Turkey has three objectives in mind with such a deal. First, the pipeline would help satisfy the fast growing energy needs of the Turkish economy. Second, it would make the KRG a de facto a protectorate of Turkey and further sever the links between the Kurdish nationalists in Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds. Finally, the AKP government hopes for greater prosperity from increased cooperation with the KRG to revitalize economic life in its Kurdish provinces.

This growing cooperation between Turkey and the KRG complicates the U.S. strategy in the region in 2013 and beyond. As Turkey openly sides with the KRG in the latter’s dispute with the al-Maliki government in Iraq, Iran emerges as the only regional state that enjoys good relations with Baghdad. This development, in turn, undermines the U.S. goal of isolating Iran in the region. Yet given the widespread anti-Americanism in the region, the U.S. has no interest in alienating Erdoğan, whose pragmatism and populist appeal more than compensates for his authoritarian tendencies and over-ambitious foreign policy initiatives.

How Erdogan’s government responds to changing regional realities next year could have far reaching consequences.