

Interview

Turkey's Political Shift

Monday 4 October 2010, by [AHMAD Aijaz](#), [PURKAYASTHA Prabir](#) (Date first published: 1 October 2010).

PART 1

Aijaz Ahmad: Israel, which is completely isolated in the region, is very unhappy about the fact that Turkey is rising as a power which is establishing very productive and extensive contacts in the region. Israel was very happy when both of them were completely isolated in the region: Turkey was in the pocket of the West, and Israel could do, with the United States, whatever it wanted. . . . It is this rise of Turkey as a major regional power — and it's the only military power in the region which is stronger than Israel — that is making Israel nervous. . . .

Certainly over the last eight or ten years, Turkey has emerged as a very major economic power. It has registered a 9% growth and a spectacular growth in its export industries, about 90% of whose exports are industrial goods. Most of them come from Anatolia. It is also the rise of the Anatolian bourgeoisie within the class structure, which is socially and culturally much more . . . you may call it conservative, you may call it whatever, but it's much more genuinely Turkish than European. . . . Turkey realizes that as a passive member of NATO it could not negotiate with the United States or the EU on the basis of its own power, because its military power is borrowed from the United States. If it manages to emerge as a regional power in its own right, it can then negotiate with the EU on the question of membership and with the United States on the whole range of issues including the fact that the United States has nuclear weapons on Turkish soil. . . .

Turkey is . . . a rising economic power thinking of its strategic interests in relation to the terminal economic decline of the United States. The United States is, and for the foreseeable future will continue to be, the world's largest and most powerful economy — there's no question about that. But there is a secular trend of decline, and moreover its disastrous policies in the Middle East and Central Asia, two regions in which Turkey belongs, makes it very, very nervous about the relationship with the United States.

One result of this terminal decline, in my view, is a number of countries in the world, these emerging economies, increasingly industrialized economies, are rethinking of their positions in the world and looking at their own regions within which to make new relationships. India is the only exception to this. It is the only growing, big economy which is still looking at the world from the American angle: "The only thing that really matters is your relationship with the United States," "The United States will make you a great power," and so on and so forth. And it's the only important economy in the world which is not radically transforming its relationship with its own neighbors and moving towards greater economic integration with its neighbors.

PART 2

Prabir Purkayastha: The other issue in Turkey is of course the issue of the Justice and Development Party being somewhat close to Islamic forces in Turkey itself, which have clashed with secular military forces earlier. Now, how do you read this? Is it in that sense a rising Islamic identity politics in Turkey? Would you say that this is more of an aspiration

of a nationalist kind? Or the combination of the two? How do you read this?

Aijaz Ahmad: Well, the way I read it actually is that Kemalist secularism is irreversible in Turkey. The only question is, "Are you going to live that secularism in the way of the Istanbul haute bourgeoisie, which is a small, upper-class minority that has a great contempt for most of Turkey?" . . . In my view, a real parallel for AKP is European Christian Democracy: conservative socially, right-wing, much more prone to neoliberal policies, and so on, but bourgeois in its own way . . . and nationalist in its orientation. . . .

Prabir Purkayastha: Given the post-9/11 scenario, do you think that the EU is actually going to accept Turkey as an EU member, given the level of Islamophobia now we are seeing in most of the European countries?

Aijaz Ahmad: The European ruling elites are perfectly sane and sensible and rational people. They understand that this Islamophobia is bogus. Their problem with Turkey is that, if Turkey comes fully into Europe, Turkey and Germany will dictate the terms. Turkey has much the largest military power; Turkey has a very powerful bourgeoisie, which is going places; demographically Turkey is equal to Germany, no other European country is. Their actual thing is that the very nature of the EU would get transformed. And, "Do you want to have, inside the EU, the largest army which is a Muslim army?" If there is Islamophobia, it is that kind, the very fundamental kind. . . .

Prabir Purkayastha: For the first seven years of the AKP, they were very close to the EU and all the European powers.

Aijaz Ahmad: You see, the thinking in Turkey actually, in my view, started changing first with the territorial collapse of the Soviet Union. All these Turkic mini-states became independent, and there was, and there still is, a tremendous upheaval in all of them. Turkey looks at that both as an opportunity and a problem. And the Iran-Iraq War, in the dollar terms, cost Turkey about \$20 billion. They took the flak — I mean, economically, they took the flak — for that war. I think these two events actually precipitated the rethinking. Then, the crisis of Kemalism internally. . . . The membership application in the EU serves the function to ward off military coups. . . . You know, we were talking earlier about how the Turkish interests are expanding into West Asia. That certainly is true. But, in the long term — Turkey has opened several new embassies in Africa and is about to open eleven more; Turkish language schools are being opened in the Far East, in Latin America, and in Africa — what they foresee is that like China, though not on the scale of China, twenty, thirty, forty years down the line Turkey will be a world economic power, and therefore they have to create soft power as the American parlance calls it. . . . This is also a certain national identity quite different from the EU. There's a Turkish national identity.

Prabir Purkayastha: How will they do all this without finally resolving the Kurdish issue? The AKP, Erdoğan, started by saying that he will have an opening toward the Kurds: various discussions were held, and it's not been borne out. In fact, they have backed off now, and basically the Kurdish problem remains where it was. . . . Do you think it is possible to do all the things they want to do without resolving that issue?

Aijaz Ahmad: Two or three responses quickly. First of all, 60% of foreign investment in Iraqi Kurdistan is Turkish; all the oil exploration projects in Iraqi Kurdistan are Turkish; Turkey has just opened a very major consulate in Erbil. So, that's one way of dealing with the Kurdish question inside Turkey. My second observation is that, if Erdoğan rapidly moved on that issue, the crisis with the military will come. It is not Erdoğan, it is not AKP, which is going so slow on it. It is the fear of military intervention. Therefore, they are doing all of this other stuff — culture and so on. Mind you, the vote bank which brought Erdoğan where he is now: first he became the mayor of Istanbul, and

the huge Kurdish vote in Istanbul went to him. So, he has had a very interesting relationship with the Kurds. . . . Under this business of “we have to show the EU,” they now have judicial commissions which are retraining Turkish judiciary in the issue of how to dispense justice to Kurds, when it comes to Kurds. . . .

So, they are going very slow, but they are moving on various fronts. With the very sensitive issue of economic and cultural interests of the Kurdish population, it will take them a while. The same thing is happening with Armenia. They take a very strong position on all these things that the US Congress wants to pass on the Armenian genocide and so on, but they are normalizing relationships with Armenia, and they are now establishing a joint commission for the study of the question of the genocide. In other words, they are opening themselves up. The problem in this is the military on the question of Kurdistan and the whole of the Turkish bourgeoisie on the question of Armenia. Erdoğan is actually much more flexible — the AKP as such is actually much more flexible.

Aijaz Ahmad Interviewed by Prabir Purkayastha

P.S.

* From MRZine:

<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/ahmad011010.html>

* Aijaz Ahmad is a Marxist critic. Part 1 was released by NewsClick on 4 September 2010 and Part 2 on 11 September 2010. The text above is an edited partial transcript of the interview. Note that this interview was conducted before the approval of the constitutional amendments (subjecting the armed forces to civilian courts among other things) in Turkey on 12 September 2010 and the subsequent resumption of Turkish attempts at addressing the Kurdish question. See, also, “Turkey’s Kurdish Rebels Extend Ceasefire for Month” (Reuters, 30 September 2010).