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MAY  
2016

## THREE QUESTIONS RAISED BY DAVUTOĞLU'S DEPARTURE

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\*The original version of this article, in Spanish, has been published in *Política Exterior*  
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**A**ccusations dumped in an anonymous blog are not usually reason enough to force the resignation of a prime minister who won elections by an absolute majority six months earlier. But Turkey never ceases to surprise and such was the detonator that forced Ahmet Davutoğlu to leave his post at the head of the government and the Justice and Development Party (AKP). In the blog, called *Pelican Brief*, someone who says he would “sacrifice his soul” for Erdoğan accuses the then prime minister of being a traitor and conniving with all sorts of conspirators: international and local media, members of the AKP’s old guard, the Gezi protest movement, Kurdish nationalists, the president of the European Parliament and even the White House.

The language the blog uses and the impact of its publication are symptomatic of the climate of political tension and polarisation in which Turkey finds itself. Erdoğan and his immediate circle insist on blind obedience. There is no margin for disagreement and they are convinced a conspiracy of global dimensions is being engineered against Turkey, in general, and against the president, in particular. But just as interesting as what this crisis reveals – or even more so – are the questions that will arise from now on. The least important of these is the identity of his replacement, who will be expected merely to carry out the instructions handed down from the presidential palace. Rather, in the coming weeks, we must pay attention to the implications of Davutoğlu’s exit on three fronts: the possibility of new, early elections, the level of collaboration with the EU, and the direction of Turkish foreign policy.

### **New elections?**

It may seem paradoxical that a party that already enjoys a sufficient majority to govern would risk calling new elections. And certainly this was one of the issues on which Erdoğan y Davutoğlu disagreed. For Davutoğlu the objective was to govern, while for Erdoğan what is most fundamental is to have everything under control, which requires a large enough majority to transform Turkey into a presidential system through constitutional reform.

The easiest way to achieve this is for the People’s Democratic Party (HDP), which represents Kurdish nationalism, and which in previous elections has opened up

towards other parts of the electorate, to fall below the 10% threshold and end up excluded from the allocation of seats. In November's rerun elections, Erdoğan showed that he knows how to handle the polls, and that he is better than anyone at exploiting the people's fears. As things stand, the presidential camp may sense that the current climate of violence and the resurgence of terrorism will radicalise the HDP's positions and alienate those who voted tactically in 2015. Additionally, they would hope the other opposition parties remain immersed in internal squabbles and are unable to present themselves to Turkish voters as attractive alternatives.

The presidential system would be then presented not as a project born of Erdoğan's personal ambition, but as an issue of national interest, arguing that the country needs strong leadership to face the threats that stalk the country. A poll published in the pro-governmental newspaper *Daily Sabah* in February placed the expected HDP vote at 9.2% and that of the AKP at 51%, with levels of support for the presidential system above 56%. This may be interpreted as confirmation of this strategy or as a means of paving the way towards it.

### **Is the collaboration with the EU in danger?**

Ahmet Davutoğlu was a key player in the negotiation of the controversial agreement between the EU and Turkey on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March. Davutoğlu committed two errors in this negotiation that raised suspicions in the presidential camp and which, as a result, pushed him towards the exit: showing off the achievement of his diplomatic success with excessive vehemence and showing too much harmony with his European partners, particularly Germany.

By itself, Davutoğlu's departure need not put March's agreement and the rapprochement with the EU in general at risk. The problem is that this crisis has struck just as doubts about the terms of the agreement were growing. One of the trade-offs Davutoğlu negotiated in exchange for Turkish cooperation on readmissions was visa liberalisation. The EU accepted, but on the condition that the criteria in the Roadmap published in December 2013 were met. Of these, the most controversial demands the revision of the legislation against organised crime and terrorism. Erdoğan has made it known that any changes to the antiterrorist legislation would be to strengthen it further. On the European demands he responded "we'll go our way, you go yours". The threats made on Twitter by Burhan Kuzu, an influential member of the AKP, may be added to this. He said that if the European Parliament made the wrong decision they would send the refugees back. The signs increasingly show that Turkey and the EU have entered a minefield.

### **Redirection of foreign policy?**

On certain occasions, professors of International Relations have the opportunity to apply their theories. Davutoğlu is one. The academic who published the book *Stratejik Derinlik (Strategic Depth)* took up the foreign policy portfolio (2009-2014) and was previously the international assessor for the prime minister. Hence the nickname he received of "architect of the new Turkish foreign policy".

The post that precipitated his resignation was also critical of his handling of foreign policy, specifically the conflict in Syria. He is accused of arrogance and miscalculation for predicting that Assad would fall in six months and for not having a Plan B if this did not happen. Turkey is in a critical situation. There is a crisis of confidence with its European and transatlantic partners, an open confrontation with Russia, it is surrounded by conflicts that, far from being resolved, are spilling into Turkish territory, and it feels uncomfortable in a game of alliances in the Middle East that

is increasingly pivoting around the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Turkey will find it difficult to make a U-turn in its foreign policy that leads to reconciliation with Russia or a change in strategy in Syria. But small adjustments must not be ruled out, above all, now that all the blame will be placed on a professor who confused theory with practice.