

# MAJOR PROBLEMS OF TURKEY'S INTERNAL POLICY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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**Abstract:** The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is one of the most interesting periods in the history of modern Turkey as it is characterized by confrontation between Secular and Islamic circles.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the success of the Justice and Development Party of the Islamist orientation was undoubtful. The ground for it had been prepared by the 90s of the 20th century, when the Welfare Party of the Islamic orientation took the leading position and won the majority in the parliament for the first time in the history of Turkey.

At the beginning of the 21st century, such a development of events had a shocking effect both on the secular authorities of Republican Turkey and on Western politicians. Turkey, as a member of NATO and a candidate country for joining the European Union, faced a historic choice: would it turn into a state based on Islamic truth and values or would it remain a secular state.

In 2000-2024, the secular authorities (both military and civil) ignore the true causes of the socio-political situation created in the country and do not reveal the reality. However, many of them are artificially created by them.

The purpose of the presented scientific paper is to depict the current issues of Turkey's internal policy in 2000-2024, namely, to study the role of the Islamic Justice and Development Party and its leader – Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the life of the country.

The chronological framework of the paper covers the years 2000-2024. This was mainly due to the fact that at that time a new era started in the political life of Turkey. This period was characterized by the subsequent rise of political Islam in the socio-political life of the country, which brought great success to the Islamic Justice and Development Party and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Thus, the study of the issues mentioned in the presented work will clarify some of the problematic issues of Turkey's internal policy in 21st century.

**Key words:** Turkey's internal policy, problems, Justice and Development Party, «New Turkey».

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**Introduction.** In the 2010s, after the start of the „Arab Spring“, there was actively discussed the prospect of introducing the so-called „Turkish model“ in other Middle Eastern countries. Official Ankara also supported this process, trying in every possible way to present Turkey as the most successful example of the synthesis of Islam and democracy.

The „Turkish model“ is a combination of European values (human rights, democratic government) and „moderate“ Islam, which seemed to be ideal for the post-revolutionary Middle East.

In the present article, we examine the main issues of Turkey's domestic policy in the 21st century in a continuous context, which will allow to clearly present both the historical aspect of the issue and its modern reality.

**Methods.** The article deals with the main problems of Turkey's domestic policy in the 21st century using the critical analysis method. The work is based on the scientific literature on the issue.

**Discussion.** At the beginning of the 21st century, in the first round of the presidential elections in the Republic of Turkey, which took place on April 27, 2000, Ahmet Necdet Sezer received 281 votes of MPs and beat the incumbent President Nevzat Yalcintas by 220 votes, who received only 61 votes. In the second round, which took place on May 1, 2000, Sezer had 314 votes, and in the third round of the elections, held on May 5, Sezer managed to secure the support of 330 MPs and become the tenth president of the Republic of Turkey (Makaradze, 2019 (a), p. 225).

On May 16, 2000, Suleyman Demirel was officially removed from office as president. Ahmet Necdet Sezer, taking the oath before the parliament, formulated the main provisions of his political course. In the republican Turkey, he again recognized secularism (laicism) as an unshakable principle of the country's political system, without which the organization of state and public life in democratic Turkey would be unthinkable.

In his speech, Ahmet Necdet Sezer actually declared the existence of a republican Turkey based on the principles of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, which, in his opinion, no force could destroy.

In July-August 2001, the Islamic-leaning Felicity Party led by Recai Kutan and the Justice and Development Party led by former Istanbul Mayor Recep Tayyip Erdogan were formed in Turkey.

Since the end of 2002, there have been active discussions in Turkish political circles about the possibility of holding early parliamentary elections. Despite the government's denial of mentioned possibility, most analysts initially believed that the situation in the country provided real grounds for such a development.

On November 3, 2002, early parliamentary elections were held in Turkey, with voter turnout at 80%. According to the results, of the 19 parties participating in the elections, only the Justice and Development Party and the Republican People's Party overcame the 10% barrier:

	Party	Percentage	Deputy
1.	Justice and Development Party (AKP)	34,1%	363
2.	Republican People's Party (CHP)	19,02%	178
3.	Independent Party		9

Following the vote, the Justice and Development Party won 363 of the 550 parliamentary seats, which was a sign of the party's sole accession to power. After the triumphant victory in the 2002 elections, the Justice and Development Party came to power. After the elections, the question of the future Prime Minister was on the agenda. One of the real candidates was considered to be Abdullah Gül, the First Deputy Chairman of the Justice and Development Party for Political Affairs, who had considerable experience in political activity. It should also be noted that after the elections, President Sezer became sympathetic to the former Chairman of the Turkish National Audit Office, Vecdi Gönul. At that time, prominent Turkish statesmen Abdulkadir Aksu and Bülent Arding were also mentioned as possible candidates for the post of Prime Minister, although politicians believed that the new Prime Minister's term would be short-lived, since Erdogan's political bans were set to expire in January 2003.

On November 18, 2002, President A. Sezer assigned the post of Prime Minister and the formation of the 58th government to Erdogan's First Deputy Abdullah Gul (Makaradze, 2019 (a), p. 228).

After the appointment of Abdullah Gul as Prime Minister, the issue of the need for the parliament to quickly adopt amendments to the constitution, that would remove legal obstacles to the election of R.T. Erdogan as Prime Minister, came to the fore.

On March 14, 2003, Erdogan became Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey, having received an official order from President Sezer to form the 59th government.

The Justice and Development Party positioned itself as a moderate Islamic and conservative force.

In 2007, the government proposed a package of amendments to the constitution, including direct elections of the president.

In April 2007, the Turkish political scene was dominated by the incumbent president (Ahmet Necdet Sezer), the army, trade unions, university rectors and opposition parties on one side, and the ruling Justice and Development Party on the other.

The main reason for the confrontation between the parties was Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s nomination for the presidency, which was followed by a half-million-strong opposition rally in Ankara on April 14-15, 2007.

On July 22, 2007, parliamentary elections with 42.5 million voters were held in Turkey. Three political parties overcame the 10% barrier:

	Party	Percentage	Deputy
1.	Justice and Development Party (AKP)	46,58%	341
2.	Republican People’s Party (CHP)	20,87%	112
3.	National Movement Party (MHP)	14,27%	71
4.	Democratic Party (DP)	5,41%	—
5.	Independent Party		26

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party increased its share of the vote from 34.1% to 46.47% compared to the 2002 parliamentary elections, although the party had fewer members in the parliament than in the previous one. This was because two opposition parties overcame the 10% electoral threshold.

On August 20, 2007, there was held the first round of the presidential elections, which was boycotted by the opposition parties in the Supreme Assembly (Majlisi). As a result, in the first round of the elections, the only presidential candidate, Abdullah Gül, received 367 votes in a secret ballot, which was not enough to win. According to the Turkish constitution, a presidential candidate had to receive a constitutional majority of votes in the 550-seat parliament in the first and second rounds.

On August 28, 2007, the Turkish parliament elected a new head of state by a majority in the third round. 56-year-old Abdullah Gul assumed the powers of the head of state from the current president of the country (Ahmet Necdet Sezer) at the Çankaya residence in Ankara.

On October 21, 2007, a referendum was held in Turkey on constitutional amendments initiated by the ruling party (1. The president is elected by the population, not by parliament; 2. The presidential term is reduced from seven to five years; 3. The president has the right to run for a second term; 4. Parliamentary elections were reduced from five to four years; 5. Reduction of the parliamentary quorum from 367 to 184, etc.), the changes were supported by 68.95% of participants (Makaradze, 2019 (a), p. 230).

Despite the success of the Justice and Development Party, secular-minded forces did not cease their activities. One of their last bursts of activity occurred in 2008, when they filed a lawsuit in the Constitutional Court demanding a ban on the ruling party. The case was decided in favor of the party.

On February 21, 2011, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Turkey submitted a proposal to the Mejlisi to hold parliamentary elections on June 12, 2011. The Parliament approved this proposal on March 3, 2011.

On April 11, 2011, political parties presented their lists of candidates for the Supreme Electoral Council. Six of the 24 political parties refused to participate, while the remaining 18 expressed their full readiness to fight.

On July 12, 2011, parliamentary elections with 50.2 million voters were held in Turkey. Three political parties overcame the 10% threshold:

	Party	Percentage	Deputy
1.	Justice and Development Party (AKP)	49,85	327
2.	Republican People's Party (CHP)	25,98	135
3.	National Movement Party (MHP)	13,04	53
4.	Independent Party	6,58	35

As we can see, the Justice and Development Party won the parliamentary elections triumphantly and convincingly. In general, the ruling party was able not only to increase the number of votes it received, but also to win in 61 of the 81 provinces of Turkey (including Istanbul, Ankara, Trabzon, Antalya, Artvin, etc.).

After the parliamentary elections of June 12, 2011, the most pressing issue in Turkey became amendments to the constitution. In a referendum held in September last year, this issue was supported by 58% of the population.

In the package of constitutional amendments developed by the Justice and Development Party, one of the most important issues was the reorganization of the justice system, aimed at weakening the political influence of the military.

The victory of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's party in the elections of July 12, 2011 once again demonstrated the course pursued by the Justice and Development Party and supported by a significant part of the Turkish population.

At the initiative of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey was to move from a parliamentary republic to a presidential system of government, according to amendments to the Constitution and the Law on Presidential Elections. After the changes, power would be consolidated in the hands of the president. The leader, elected by direct vote, could hold office for a renewable five-year term (Makaradze, 2016, p. 85).

The presidential elections held on August 10, 2014 were one of the most important in the history of the Turkish Republic. In the first direct presidential elections, former Prime Minister and leader of the Justice and Development Party Recep Tayyip Erdogan won with 51.79% of the vote, and on August 28 of the same year, Ahmet Davutoğlu became Prime Minister.

In his campaign speeches, Erdogan stated that if elected, he would not be a mere symbolic president, but would fully utilize the powers granted to him. He emphasized the achievements of the Justice and Development Party and presented his vision of a „new Turkey“ to the public.

The victory of Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party was the result of the fact that Turkish society was tired and exhausted by the actions of the elite, which had been formed over decades and was deeply mired in corruption. In comparison, the representatives of the Justice and Development Party, with their greater honesty, simplicity, and closeness to the people, were more promising.

Erdogan managed to achieve something almost impossible in modern Turkish history – he significantly reduced the untouchable and powerful military elite and removed it from political leadership.

As the generals weakened, the unity of religious leaders grew in direct proportion. The Directorate of Religious Affairs became one of the most influential structures in the Turkish state system. During Erdogan's rule, 7,300 mosques were built in Turkey as a result of the reform of the education system, religion became a compulsory subject in higher military schools, and religious studies was introduced in the middle grades of secular schools, and the ban on girls attending religious services was lifted. Wearing headscarves on school grounds, which was previously unthinkable, was abolished.

On June 7, 2015, there were held parliamentary elections in Turkey, in which the ruling Justice and Development Party lost its majority in the 550-seat parliament and received 256 mandates, the Republican People's Party took second place with 132 seats, the Nationalist Movement Party took third place with 82 seats, and the People's Democratic Party took fourth place with 80 seats.

Following the elections, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu failed to form a coalition government with other political parties in parliament, which led to the Turkish President dissolving the government and calling the 26th snap parliamentary elections in the country.

On November 1, 2015, in snap parliamentary elections Erdoğan used all state mechanisms at his disposal to ensure the victory of the Justice and Development Party, and it indeed regained the majority in parliament lost in June 2015.

The ruling party received 49.4% of the votes in the elections, while its main opponent, the Republican People's Party, gained 25.4%. Pro-Kurdish and nationalist parties overcame the 10% barrier and received seats in parliament. Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu called the election results a victory for the Turkish people and democracy.

On the evening of July 15, 2016, the attention of the world media was focused on the events in Turkey. About 300 people have been killed in attacks by armed groups in several parts of the country aimed at overthrowing the government.

On Friday evening, tanks appeared in Ankara and Istanbul, opening fire on the Turkish parliament building and the presidential palace. Airplanes fired cannons at the headquarters of the national intelligence service in the capital.

On July 15, it was also reported that on the night of the coup, when President Erdogan was returning to Istanbul from vacation, two rebel fighters tried to attack his plane, but for unknown reasons the attack did not take place, so Erdogan arrived safely in Istanbul.

150,000 people, including judges and high-ranking military officials, were arrested on charges of attempted coup.

Following the coup attempt, Turkish law enforcement agencies dismissed 37,500 civil servants and police officers and suspended the licenses of 21,000 teachers (Makaradze, 2019 (a), p. 293).

Official Ankara blamed former imam Fethullah Gülen for the July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, although the Pennsylvania-based religious leader categorically denied any involvement in the uprising (Fethullah Gülen died on October 21, 2024).

On April 16, 2017, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party held a constitutional referendum that called for the country's transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system, the abolition of the prime minister's position, an increase in the number of seats in parliament from 550 to 600, and the creation of a Supreme Court and the Turkish Prosecutors' Council (HSYK).

On April 16, 2017, as a result of a constitutional referendum, Republican Turkey switched from a parliamentary to a presidential system of government, which was one of the most decisive steps in the political life of Turkey since the reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

On June 24, 2018, early presidential and parliamentary elections were held in Turkey, which were won by President R. T. Erdogan.

The political parties showed the following results in the parliamentary elections held on June 24, 2018:

Party	Percentage	Deputy
(Justice and Revival Party) AKP	42,6	295
(Republican People's Party) CHP	22,6	146
(Peoples' Democratic Party) HDP	11,7	67
(Nationalist Movement Party) MHP	11,1	49
(Good Party) İYİP	10,0	43
(Prosperity Party) SP	1,3	0

After the presidential inauguration on July 9, 2018, R. Erdogan began his presidential activities (Bokuchava, 2020, p. 245).

On March 31, 2019, local elections were held in Turkey. It must be said that these were not ordinary elections. The election campaign took place in an extremely polarized environment, as the parties



viewed these elections as a kind of vote of confidence in the 17-year rule of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his party (Makaradze, 2019 (b)).

On May 14, 2023, presidential and parliamentary elections were held in Turkey, and a second round of presidential elections was held on May 28.

In the presidential elections in Turkey on May 14, 2023, the incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdogan received 49.5% of the votes, narrowly missing out on victory in the first round.

After winning the presidential elections in Turkey, Erdogan almost completely changed the composition of the executive government, with the exception of the ministers of culture, tourism and health. Particular attention was paid to the changes in the government's economic team, where Mehmet Shimshek took over the post of Minister of Treasury and Finance, and Hafiz Gaye Erkan took over the post of head of the Central Bank of Turkey. According to experts, these changes may indicate that Turkey wanted to abandon its unconventional macroeconomic policy and move to a traditional economic model, which is associated with a record devaluation of the national currency and rising inflation.

On March 31, 2024, local elections were held in Turkey. This was a major political event for the country, which revealed significant changes in the political landscape (Makaradze, 2024).

Elections were held in 81 provinces of Turkey. Mayors, city council members, and village heads were elected.

The opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) won an important victory. It retained control of Istanbul and Ankara, as well as of other major cities.

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) suffered significant losses. CHP candidate Ekrem Imamoglu won the Istanbul mayoral election again. This was a significant blow to President Erdogan's party. CHP candidate Mansur Yavaş also retained his post as mayor of Ankara.

These results are seen as a serious challenge to the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The elections showed growing support for the opposition, especially in major cities.

The elections took place against the backdrop of Turkey's economic difficulties, high inflation, and the devaluation of the lira.

In the Kurdish-dominated southeast, the results were more mixed, with different parties making gains.

International observers said the elections were largely peaceful, although there were some reports of irregularities.

These elections are considered an important event in the political history of Turkey, which showed changes in public sentiment and the balance of political forces.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan remains the President of Turkey. He has held the post since 2014.

**Conclusions.** In conclusion, the analysis of the domestic politics of Turkey in the 2020s has shown that the most important factors are:

- to strengthen the political dialogue with the opposition parties, especially taking into account the results of the local elections;

- to create platforms for reaching consensus on important issues;

- to prioritize reducing inflation and stabilizing the currency;

- to carry out structural reforms to strengthen the economy and attract foreign investment;

- to enhance the independence of the judiciary;

- to ensure media freedom and pluralism;

- to strengthen anti-corruption mechanisms;

- to ensure transparency of public contracts and tenders;

- to improve social policy and continue the integration of ethnic minorities and dialogue with the Kurdish community;

- to ensure the protection of minority rights and their participation in political processes;

- to collaborate with major opposition-governed cities to implement infrastructure projects and more.

Turkey's future depends only on the further deepening of the culture of democracy and the principles

of government accountability to the people. Neither a military coup nor an authoritarian political rule is the line that the Turkish Republic should follow.

It should be noted that the Europeanized part of Turkish society is quite numerous, it is already politically active and will not easily abandon the principles of secularism. At the same time, it can be noted that the part of Turkish society that carries a Western mentality, and especially the youth, with its worldview and demands, have already risen above Atatürk's secularism and occupied positions of high European standards of democracy and human rights. As for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, although he remains a strong political figure, it is possible that the recent crisis in Turkey may change his approach after some time.

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