

By Burak Bekdil

Winston Churchill once described Russia as “a riddle wrapped in mystery inside an enigma.” Today, that description is perfectly applicable to 21st century Turkey. One of Europe’s poorest economies — with the Old Continent’s youngest and second-largest population — Turkey has a unique combination of demographics, politics and economics. Annual population growth is 1.5 percent; crime rates are around 40 percent and rising; 80 percent evade their taxes; a quarter of households use stolen electricity; half of the economy is “underground” and corruption is endemic. Yet, few Turks complain.

When Recep Tayyip Erdogan launched his Justice and Development Party (AKP-) in 2002, parliamentary elections were only a few months away, and he based his election campaign on solid pledges to fight corruption. In November 2002, the AKP won a landslide election victory, earning an unusual two-thirds majority in Turkey’s 550-seat Parliament, despite getting only one-third of the national vote. The discrepancy is a quirk of Turkey’s peculiar election laws, which include a 10 percent national threshold for parliamentary representation.

But even from the AKP’s early days in power, there were hints that the party’s pre-election commitment to fight corruption came with no genuine desire to fulfill it.

Erdogan, newly elected as prime minister, appointed Kemal Unakitan, a former Islamic (interest-free) banker, to be finance minister, just as Unakitan was being tried in court for producing fake invoices to tax authorities. At that point, the charges against him were suspended due to his parliamentary immunity. Members of Parliament quickly passed a law that granted amnesty to a number of tax offenses, including those perpetrated by the Finance minister.

Unakitan, later found out to be the owner of unlicensed villas on a posh hill in Istanbul, came under pressure in 2003 for alleged tax favors for his son. Substantiated evidence showed that Unakitan’s son had imported 4,000 tons of corn shortly after a government decree more than halved the import tax on corn. Only four days after the 4,000 tons of corn had cleared customs, the import tax was raised by 25 percent.

That was hardly surprising in a country where corruption questions have swirled around Erdogan. The prime minister himself, like his Finance minister, owns an unlicensed building in Istanbul. Erdogan once attributed

the source of his then multi-million-dollar wealth to “the jewelry his son received in gifts during his circumcision ceremony.” Erdogan’s chief advisor in charge of the slush fund has a criminal record for presenting a bogus diploma to a bank where he was employed.

In 2005, Transparency International found that 39 percent of Turks believed corruption had increased a little or significantly since 2002, when the AKP came to power. Since then, there have been verified reports of systematic corruption, nepotism, favoritism and other bad governance, both within central and local government and within the state establishment.

Rarely are charges brought against the culprits, with the exception of a military investigation against a service commander. In June 2007, former navy commander, Admiral İlhami Erdil, was sentenced to 30 months in prison for “abuse of power and failing to explain how he could afford two luxury apartments in Istanbul.” Erdil became the first Turkish military commander imprisoned for corruption.

The civilian picture is much less impressive. For example, in 2004, a maverick Turkish prosecutor, Omer Suha Aldan, arrested 12 high-profile businessmen and a wealthy, 26-year-old lawyer who happened to be the son of a very senior judge, on charges of systematic corruption in the judiciary. The defendants were released promptly, and the prosecutor was removed from the case despite hundreds of folders containing solid evidence. The lawyer’s father, a member of the Court of Appeals and acting chairman of the supreme board that oversees promotions, postings and disciplinary proceedings against judges and prosecutors, was eventually convicted. He was “requested to resign,” the heaviest possible penalty for a judge of his seniority.

Yet, according to Transparency International’s 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index, Turkey progressed to 60th place from the previous year’s 69th (out of 163 countries surveyed in 2006 and 159 in 2005). However, Transparency International included Turkey among its bribery “bad boys” in international business, along with China, Russia and India. Marie Wolkers, the senior research coordinator at Transparency International, said: “It’s very frightening, and it is actually very consistent with the monitoring of Turkey by the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) convention process, which produced a report on Turkey which is quite alarming. I mean, it is very bad.”

Empirical evidence supports Wolkers' view despite the slight improvement in perception of corruption. For example, in a small town bordering Syria, "official" AKP figures were found to have won over 250 small and medium-size government contracts. That number excluded those contracts possibly won by "unofficial" AKP men — relatives and friends of party officials. In response to a chorus of criticism, Erdogan's defense was not convincing. "What's wrong?" the prime minister said. "Are they (the contract winners) not the men of this country?" Erdogan said the fact that over 250 government contracts went to AKP politicians was merely a "coincidence" and not favoritism at all.

But that was not the only shady episode during Erdogan's first term. In the run-up to the July 22, 2007, parliamentary elections, the opposition put together 60 well-documented dossiers containing serious allegations of governmental fraud, nepotism and favoritism, which the government denied but did not challenge with substantiated counter-evidence. For example, Erdogan's son, who had only four years earlier studied on a scholarship granted by a businessman, suspiciously purchased a cargo ship for nearly US\$3 million. How a student unable to finance his own studies was able to afford a vessel was never explained.

There are yet more charges on the colorful list. In one case, 10 railway station renewal contracts went to a member of the AKP. She was later found out to have been the possessor of a "green card" that the government distributes to the poorest Turks for free health services. In another, it turned out that the AKP, in just its first 13 days in power, had awarded 219 road tenders, totaling US\$45 million. In yet another, the state railway company awarded a US\$2.15 million contract for the operation of the Izmir port to a company, "without tendering." One of the company's shareholders was a former AKP politician.

In 2004, for the first time in Turkish history, a state institution requested prosecution against a cabinet minister on corruption charges. The Public Tendering Institution charged Education Minister Huseyin Celik with corruption involving 62 tenders for the construction of 135 schools, but the government did not give permission for legal proceedings against the minister.

Earlier than that, a government-owned paper and newsprint manufacturer, estimated to be worth US\$51 million, had been sold to a pro-government businessman for only US\$1.1 million.

There are more recent examples of AKP's systematic tolerance to internal corruption. An AKP deputy, Cemal Kaya, found guilty by a court for fraud in energy contracts, was re-nominated by AKP and re-elected in the July 2007 elections. His parliamentary immunity protects him from serving his prison sentence.

With that much "stain" in the public domain, a corruption-sensitive electorate in a mature democracy might be expected to vote against the government. Not in Turkey.

Erdogan's government won 46.6 percent of the vote on July 22, 2007, giving him an even more comfortable rule in his second term as prime minister. In a way, the Turkish electorate "approved or tolerated" AKP's bad corruption record; or they simply traded off corruption with some economic recovery and a blend of Islamist/conservative ideology. As one merchant in Ankara explained to me in 2006: "We know they (the government) are stealing big. But the others would have done the same. These are at least men of my worldview."

Hidden in that explanation lie the dangerous indications of social decadence, a kind of selective tolerance to corruption. That sentiment, as evinced by the election result, wipes out the only popular check on corrupt governments: voting. Without the threat of being unseated, public officials may feel free to exercise all sorts of bad governance, especially in a country like Turkey, where there is little legal sanctioning against corruption.