

Turkey's EU 'gamble'

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The outgoing European Commission, in its recent report, has recommended opening of accession negotiations with Turkey though with the toughest conditions. This particular report was long awaited since it was ultimately going to pave the way for Turkey's European Union membership. It's not an easy job nevertheless. It involves a plethora of intricacies and a bunch of ifs and buts which are likely to put the Turkish leadership in extremely hot waters, in the coming days.

In December 2002, the European Council agreed that during its December 2004 meeting, it would decide on the basis of the Commission's report and recommendations whether Turkey complies with the Copenhagen political criteria. The European Council also then decided that if Turkey did comply with the criteria, accession negotiations would begin without any further delay.

The Commission while recommending opening of talks with Turkey observed in the report that Turkey still needed to do more in the fields of human rights, torture and ill treatment, freedom of Press, freedom of religion; gender equality, influence of military and corruption. The report noted that Turkey had made 'considerable' progress in adopting international human rights conventions. About torture and ill treatment the report said, "although torture is no longer systematic, numerous cases of torture and in particular ill-treatment still continue to occur and further efforts will be required to eradicate such practice".

The report further says that the non-Muslim communities continue to face hardships and they are not allowed to train clergy. Likewise, the European Commission called upon the Turkish government to do more to ensure that women take an equal place in society. The report recognised that civilian control of the military has been strengthened yet the armed forces continue to exercise influence through a series of informal mechanisms. About corruption the report says, "Despite progress in fighting graft, surveys continue to indicate that corruption remains a very serious problem in Turkey hence concerted efforts are needed to do away with this problem".

Turkey has made a remarkable recovery from the financial crisis that plunged the country into a deep recession in 2001. Ruled since November 2002 by a one-party government, which is fully determined to joining the European Union, Turkey, has achieved a level of political stability that the previous coalition government failed to achieve. It won't be out of mark to say that prospects for this country of about 70 million were never so shining, as are they right now under the rule of Prime Minister Erdogan. No one in Turkey feels there is any room for complacency now. Every body seems to have rolled up their sleeves in order to match adequately the challenges of the hard times. Markets are now focusing on the EU. Over the past few years Turkey has made tremendous strides toward this goal by introducing legislation to abolish the death penalty, broadening freedom of expression, limiting the role of the army and granting Kurds limited cultural rights.

Some European politicians, concerned that the EU will find it hard to absorb such a large Muslim country, continue to oppose Turkey's membership. But the tide seems to be turning in Turkey's favour. There was an early August survey of analysts' forecasts conducted by Reuters, which had indicated that 70 percent believe the EU will initiate accession talks with Turkey next year. In a similar survey conducted in May, the ratio of optimists was 40 percent.

On September 25, the 550-member Turkish parliament approved new penal code, to boost women's rights and punish police more severely for torture. "The law complies with EU legislation...we have taken a big step towards the EU", Koksila Toptan, head of the parliament's justice committee, said after the approval of new penal code. The new penal code expands freedom of expression, grants greater individual freedoms and increases penalties for rights abusers and torturers. In another major step, it introduced life terms for perpetrators of

honour killings', the feudal practice of killing women perceived as un-virtuous. Other amendments bring jail terms for the sexual molestation of children, the trafficking of human organs and the pollution of the environment. The law will take effect on April 1, 2005, after the President ratifies it.

The recent changes in the Penal Code are part of reforms already introduced in October 2001, when the Turkish parliament had adopted a major constitutional reform package aimed at strengthening guarantees in the field of human rights and fundamental freedoms and limiting capital punishment. A new civil Code was adopted in November 2001. The adoption of these reforms demonstrates the determination of the majority of Turkey's political leaders to move towards further alignment with the values and standards of the European Union. These reforms were adopted under difficult political and economic circumstances, and represent a major shift in the Turkish context. The building of political consensus around these changes was prepared by an intensive public debate concerning EU accession, which took place in Turkey with the participation of political parties, civil society, business as well as academic circles.

Many factors have led the perception that Turkey's entry may end European Union's identity as a representative body of the European people. Some even said that Turkey's membership could end European Union. To me, this argument is primarily based on emotional feelings and ignores fully the reality of Turkey's being a European country. Turkey straddles two continents, serving as the crossroads of civilisations for centuries. The biggest issue, which haunts the EU mandarins the most, is Turkey's burgeoning population. Turkey, no doubt would become second largest country after Germany, once it becomes a member of the Union. It's true; yet the EU leaders cannot overlook the fact that in coming years the population of EU would squeeze abnormally keeping in view the low birth rate and the increasing number of aging millions. They therefore direly need a country where birth rates are higher as compared to the other European countries, in order to make up the population deficit.

The Turkish government has made it clear that it expects nothing less than a firm date from EU leaders when they meet on December 17 to decide on whether this country has a future in their union. A positive decision would deepen an identity crisis in a country that has been waiting at Europe's doorstep for decades and whose strictly secular system is often viewed with suspicion by fellow Muslim states.

A 'No' could be more than fatal for the Prime Minister Erdogan's government. Turkey has almost changed its entire set of penal code. Military that used to be the only decisive force in Turkey, has been contained to the satisfaction of the European Union. Likewise, political and socio-economic changes have also been brought about in order to fulfil the membership criteria. A negative response, in these circumstances from EU is likely to cause upheavals. It's indeed a big gamble. On the other hands, If Turkey sees that EU membership will not happen, it could start seeing itself as more of a regional actor. It could try to get closer to Middle East or seek better ties with countries such as Russia and Iran.

My understanding is that the European Council, a body of all the heads of state of government of the 25 EU member countries, which is likely to meet 17 December, 2004, would give a green signal for start of accession talks with Turkey, as recommended by the European Commission in its October 5 report, with difficult-to-meet conditions. The membership process can take another 10 to 15 years if negotiations start in early 2005.

At the same time, I do not agree with the popular opinion that the Greek Cyprus can veto Turkey's EU membership during the European Council meeting. The Greek Cypriots have already earned highest amount of disrepute to the Union by turning down UN peace plan for Cyprus reunification, in April this year. Good luck to Turkey.

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