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Transcript

The Future of Democracy in Turkey: Perceptions and Realities

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Remarks as prepared for delivery

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BÜLENT ARINÇ (TRANSLATED FROM TURKISH):

Distinguished guests,

I would like to begin my speech by expressing my pleasure to be together with you here at Chatham House, which is one of the prominent policy institutes of the United Kingdom. I have made similar speeches in many countries so far, the most recent being at the Carnegie Endowment in USA in November. The topic of my speech there was Challenges and Successes in Turkey's Democracy Process. And today, I am here to speak on a different and challenging topic. You would appreciate how demanding it can be to speak on the future of a country's democracy.

However, we assert that there will be more democracy, more freedom and more human rights in Turkey's future.

We have always considered democracy a polestar for Turkey, an indispensable value. Maintaining our stance, we want that daily events be discussed by distinguishing facts and perceptions.

Each topic and event needs to be assessed in its own conditions and context. If you discuss the topics about Turkey with a perception that is based on the conditions in the UK, then you fail to solve issues. I believe that assessing the events by focusing on each country's own position and conditions will provide the most accurate image of that country.

Dear guests,

I see democracy as a slow journey of equality which rests on a sound basis and grows with changes. As a jurist, I believe that the significance of equality lies in its role as the protector of rights and freedoms. The last 12 years have been the period when Republic of Turkey witnessed the most considerable steps towards democracy in its history of 90 years.

We have no intention at all to reverse this investment we have made in democracy in these 12 years! We made a promise to our people and to the world. In a way, we signed Rousseau's social contract with our people. Our endeavour is to build a future for Turkey where equality, rule of law, and rights will expand to the utmost.

I could say that our contract with our people is similar to Magna Carta. We have unfortunately not been able to succeed our efforts for a new constitution. We have tried every way but could not achieve for now. In spite of the coup-era constitution, we built a new Turkey of rights and freedoms within legal boundaries in 12 years. We do not have a

constitution which prioritises democracy, rights and freedoms but we have a government that keeps the words given to people.

People believed in the promises we made back in 2002 and we have been in power for 12 years, backed by record vote. Turkey addresses to humanity both in its vicinity and globally with a different voice and stance in world politics.

Distinguished guests,

Limits of security and freedom is a topic that demands 'fine-tuning' in a democratic country. The first action taken by AK Party in this regard has been lifting the state of emergency. Our citizens breathed a sigh of relief after a long period. With this first action of ours and numerous legal regulations, we have expanded freedoms in a 12 year period. Now, I would like to mention some of these legal regulations;

Reinstatement of Citizenship Rights, Abolishment of the State Security Courts and Special-Authority Courts, Reverting Place Name Changes, Policy of Zero Tolerance to Torture, establishment of the Ombudsman Institution, Improvements towards Ensuring a Fair and Speedy Trial. There have been improvements in nearly 80 topics and this determination has its source in our belief in democracy.

Within the broad democracy perspective of new Turkey, our priority is to ensure that Turkey becomes a land of peace. Turkey lost nearly 40,000 people because of the terrorist activities that have continued for 40 years. In a similar case- though the figures might differ-, around 2,500 people lost their lives during the troubled times with IRA. So, the number of people who lost their lives as a result of terrorism is more than fifteen-fold when compared to the case of IRA. Billions of Turkish liras and US dollars were spent for security measures. We do not want to lose one more life to terrorism.

The most basic aspect of democracy is the protection of human life, isn't it?

Therefore, taking a great political risk, we initiated the settlement process to address terrorism which is the greatest challenge of new Turkey.

Our goal is to put an end to violence and clear the way for politics as much as we can.

We view the Kurdish issue from a perspective of democratic rights. At this point, while we are maintaining a settlement process that is based on participatory democracy, we hold an attitude that centres on the rights and demands of all citizens. As part of our efforts to provide our citizens with more

state services and easier access to those services, we are clearing the way for education in different languages and dialects other than Turkish at private schools.

While the use of Kurdish is a birth right, it has been exploited for terrorism. Kurds were not able to speak Kurdish in public in the mid-1940s and after the 1980 coup. The changes in this issue in the last five years have pulled the Kurdish language out of the boundaries of security theories and made it a topic of human rights. The Kurdish to Turkish dictionary by the Turkish Language Association will be available for public very soon. I have personally been following this project.

There is no place for guns and violence in democracies no matter what. We have only one principle regarding the Kurdish issue: maximizing the democracy and freedoms and minimizing the terror as much as possible.

That is why Turkey needs more democracy.

We do not want to see terrorism in Turkey in the future. We want to leave the PKK and Kurdish issues behind and make Turkey prosperous, peaceful and powerful.

Distinguished guests,

Our 90 year old Republic has fed from the essence of democracy and transformed into a real democratic republic in the last 12 years. The last output of this advance in democracy is the democracy package announced on 30 September, 2013

The package was not prepared behind closed doors but it was rather elaborated with the active participation of every section of the society. We stated that this work was **neither an end nor a beginning** and we presented a new democracy package to the Parliament. We will diminish the period of detention to 5 years and abolish the special courts with this new package.

Turkey takes firm steps towards becoming a country where everyone can freely express themselves, talk about the future and live freely. At this point, I would like to emphasize on a misperception concerning our country.

I often make statements on freedom of press as the Deputy Prime Minister responsible for Press and Information. We regret to see news alleging that Turkey is a country where journalists are locked up although we inform our foreign friends and press members on this issue on every occasion. Turkey is a country which expands the freedom of press and makes holistic progress to this end.

I would like to underline a subject by sharing the latest data with you. There are now 40 arrested journalists in Turkey according to the list submitted to the Ministry of Justice by the Committee to Protect Journalists in December 2013. I asked for a detailed research on the names stated on the list. Two of these 40 journalists have been released, the judicial process of 12 others has ended and they have been sentenced and the other 26 journalists are still in detention. These people have been charged mostly with such petty crimes as membership of a terrorist organization, theft. In other words, there are huge differences between the statements in the report and the facts.

Let's assume that someone is arrested and when asked about their profession, they say that they are a journalist. Does this answer mean that they were arrested for journalism? Then we should also talk about the number of arrested doctors, engineers, lawyers and academicians.

I am calling on those who write reports, express their opinions and direct the global public opinion on this issue once again: There are only a handful of people in Turkey who have been arrested due to their profession of journalism. You cannot achieve anything by writing names on the reports because law requires proof.

I also maintain that such allegations are made on purpose. When someone, who is claimed to have placed a bomb somewhere or killed a police officer, is arrested, they say that they are a journalist and are added to the list of arrested journalists.

I closely follow the media-related events in the United Kingdom. Can we associate the acts of those who were responsible for the eavesdropping scandal covered by the Leveson report with journalism?

I do believe that those who have been arrested for actions other than journalism claim to be a journalist on purpose to depict Turkey as a country of arrested journalists.

I would like to raise another issue about enhancing the freedom of press. We have expanded the border between the terror propaganda and freedom of press in favour of freedoms with three judicial reform packages. However, if a journalist has committed a crime, does it comply with the equality principle of democracy to favour them just because they are a journalist? I am also a lawyer and worked as a criminal lawyer for 25 years. I defended many people who were tried for death. I would like to state as a lawyer that Turkey drew the line between penalty and freedom of press in a perfect way. It is the responsibility of journalists to stay away from crimes and violence in order not to get involved in any legal process.

Distinguished guests,

We think that the great transformation that Turkey has been undergoing since 2002 contributes to the development of our people and the whole humanity. As the Deputy Prime Minister responsible for Foundations and the Government Spokesman, I personally followed the process of returning the foundation properties which belonged to different religious groups. We have concluded the return of 250 foundation properties worth 2.5 billion Turkish liras (\$1.2 billion US dollars) and with the recent democracy package; we have also returned Mor Gabriel Monastery's land.

Thus, with political willpower, we have rapidly resolved a problem which has distressed our people and Assyrian friends for a long time. I also believe that we will get positive results concerning the Halki seminary in a short time which is also under my responsibility.

The regime of democracy allows minorities to express themselves and come to power. I consider the tyranny of majority as the most serious problem of democracy. The only way to overcome this problem is through the distinction between majority and plurality.

In this context, I should refer to the Gezi Park events which topped Turkey's agenda in June. As the Prime Minister was abroad, I was personally involved in managing the process and I should say that I felt proud about the environmental sensitivity during the initial days of the Gezi Park events. And I apologized before the world from our citizens who were subjected to the overuse of force for their sensitivity about the environment. As a requirement of democracy, I met with their representatives. I told them that we would wait for the court ruling about the park and call for a plebiscite even if the court ruling was contrary to their expectation. At that moment everything had been on track and we approached with understanding to our citizens showing their reactions.

However these democratic protests of good will suddenly turned into a field exploited by illegal organizations and groups that were unable to overthrow the government at the ballot box. An atmosphere threatening the safety of our citizens was created. In a way we were tested, yet we put in place supervision and control mechanisms against all extreme forms of action by the security forces. Occupy Wall Street protests in the USA were of a similar nature. I recall the police intervention that day. Turkey, unfortunately, is a country that is involved in a fight against terrorist organizations. We always tried to observe the fine line between the Gezi events and terrorism. The moment that the events seemed to shift toward violence, it was time to draw the line.

We passed a test, and I believe Gezi was a good lesson in terms of the level that our democracy has reached and of the management of the process by our government.

Distinguished guests,

Unfortunately there is information pollution in today's world. We create ideas without information to build upon. A piece of news, a photo or an expression on internet is perceived to be real by millions of people without further research. We consume information so quickly that one does not even have enough time to correct a mistake before new mistakes come up. Information, news, photos and videos are consumed as the dignities, lives and personal information of individuals are ruined. We have drawn up a new internet regulation to prevent these problems.

We mainly aim to regulate by law the huge benefits as well as the harmful aspects of internet. The primary purpose of the new internet regulation is to protect the rights of the individual. There are so many victims of internet! We, as politicians, have relatively been the least affected party; because we have the chance to immediately deny an allegation in front of the press. And so many false allegations are raised about politicians that the public, at one point, gets used to this. However, there are people whose lives are ruined and family lives are damaged as they lack such means.

We have drafted a new bill to make the internet more humane. In the event of a violation of individual rights on the internet, the relevant content will be removed by an independent board called the Access Providers Union and the court ruling will follow. It is because a court ruling to block a web page has no meaning once a certain time has elapsed after the publication of the content about an individual. We are changing this system and I believe the new bill will set an example.

I would like to read out Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;

'No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.'

According to the Declaration, Governments have the primary duty of taking measures against attempts threatening human dignity. We are fulfilling this duty.

The internet legislation has no connection with the Gezi events or the latest developments; the government has been working on this regulation for two years. Parties involved have submitted their opinions on this bill to the relevant Ministry in April 2013, prior to these incidents.

At the heart of these ideas lies the sincere belief in democracy that Turkey maintained during the 12-year AK Party rule and will maintain in the future. Rest assured about the future of democracy in Turkey. It is not possible to alter reality with wrong perceptions.

Before I end my speech, I would like to assure that Turkey will continue to keep the bar for democracy high in the future. I am concluding my words here, awaiting your questions to further elaborate on these issues. Thank you very much for your patience.