

Will Turkish government deliver on its latest political promises?

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ANKARA: The Turkish public wakes up every day to statements from leading political figures in Ankara promising a “new wave of reform” that is expected to arrive soon.

However, considering the country’s past record on the rule of law, democracy, human rights and management of the economy, there is a big question mark over how these actors will deliver on their commitments.

Promises of reform have become a recurrent theme in President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his government member’s speeches in recent days, especially after the sudden reshuffle of the country’s top economic team, which includes the resignation of Berat Albayrak, the finance minister and also Erdogan’s son-in-law.

Erdogan has chosen a conciliatory tone in his speeches directed at the financial market, speeches reminiscent of those he made in 2014 about reform of the Turkish economy.

On Nov. 11, Erdogan pledged the launch of market-friendly policies, and to contain inflation and put the country back on a path to growth.

The Turkish lira has lost about a third of its value this year and almost half of its value against the US dollar since May 2018 – making it among the worst performers in emerging markets – although it bounced back following the redesign of the country’s economic management team and the appointment of a new central bank governor and finance minister.

The newly appointed figures both committed to prioritizing price stability in a bid to please global markets, although a decision to raise interest rates to a significant level is expected to be announced on Nov. 19.

Berk Esen, a political scientist from Sabanci University in Istanbul, said that Albayrak’s resignation is a blow to Erdogan, whose regime has fallen on hard times due to the economic downturn and growing popular opposition against his government.

Esen does not attribute too much significance to Erdogan’s and his A team’s recent statements about the start of a new era of reforms in the economy and judiciary.

“Under the ruling Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) rule, Turkey has experienced several waves of ‘reform’ that led to centralization of power in the hands of the ruling party and its leader,” he told Arab News.

Justice is another area where the government suffers from internal bleeding from disenchanted party members and constituencies.

Along with declining foreign reserves, a weakening currency and growing isolation due to engagement in several battle scenes in its region, Turkey’s credentials in the justice field are on a downward trend and making investors concerned about the country.

However, Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul promised speedy trials and less pre-trial prison time in another speech on Nov. 12 in which he criticized lower courts going against decisions of the country's constitutional court as harmful to investor trust.

"The judiciary should only consider the conscious, law and constitution. Let justice be served, if it means the coming of doomsday," he said.

In the meantime, the Turkish Council of Judges and Prosecutors HSK will re-evaluate the high-profile case of Turkish philanthropist and businessman Osman Kavala, who has been behind bars since Nov. 1, 2017, as part of a legal saga illustrating the deterioration of the rule of law in Turkey.

The new trial of Kavala, accused of "attempting to undermine the constitutional order," is set to begin on Dec. 18.

Esen thinks that following Albayrak's resignation, Erdogan needs to strengthen the ranks of his regime and project an image of stability and calm.

"There were major defections from his party over the past year so he needs to find a way to stop the hemorrhaging of party cadres and votes to the newly established splinter parties and restore confidence in the Turkish economy," he said.

Erdogan's AKP is facing a big fall in popularity according to the latest polls, which reveal that public support dropped below 30 percent for the first time, while his nationalistic partner's vote share drops below the 10 percent election threshold. This decline is significant considering that the AKP secured 43 percent of the vote in the previous parliamentary elections in 2018.

Ali Babacan, former economy czar and the founder of a breakaway party DEVA, recently launched his campaign, "Don't be Afraid, Turkey," urging people to speak their minds and express themselves freely.

According to Esen, Joe Biden's election as US president will bring the issue of sanctions back to the table over Turkey's purchase of Russian air defenses when he takes office in January 2021.

"In response, Erdogan is probably seeking a restorationist course in foreign policy and the economy to stabilize his government. If these moves damage his agreement with his coalition partner and leader of the nationalistic MHP, Devlet Bahceli, the option of early elections may arise," he said.

Burak Bilgehan Ozpek, an Ankara-based political scientist, said that the latest reform promises from high-ranking governmental officials showed that the AKP had noticed its declining political power since local elections last year, where it lost the mayorship of several key cities to the opposition.

"So far, Albayrak and his team were encouraging a policy of criminalization of all dissident actors and they were implementing a political tutelage solely based on national security paradigms. However, this choice further polarized the country and fueled a one-man rule," he told Arab News.

According to Ozpek, the ruling government's only option to protect its voter base is by initiating reforms, ending judicial scandals, transforming its monopoly on the media and opening up space for people to freely express themselves.

"However, if Erdogan doesn't give any concession from his own power, these reforms cannot materialize, and all these promises would remain on paper, leading to a freefall in their electoral base," he said.



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[Yemeni bank reopened after Houthis raid in Sanaa](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-11-15 22:07

AL-MUKALLA: A major Yemeni bank on Sunday reopened branches across the country, days after shuttering its operations in the wake of a raid by the Houthis on the bank's headquarter in Sanaa.

Last week, Houthi intelligence operatives stormed the main office of Tadamon Bank in Sanaa and ordered workers to leave the building before switching off servers and cameras. The operatives seized control of the building for days and stopped operations, forcing the bank to close its branches across Yemen,

giving employees leave and barring customers from making withdrawals and other transactions.

On Thursday, the bank issued a statement saying that it is in contact with the Houthi-controlled central bank for clarification about the raid, adding that the closure had disrupted the distribution of humanitarian assistance and affected customers' businesses.

The internationally-recognized-government of Yemen relocated the headquarters of the central bank to Aden in 2016 to deprive the Houthis of a huge source of finance and have sought to convince Sanaa-based banks and mobile operators to move their operations to Aden.

Established in 1996, Tadamon Bank has 37 branches and more than 700 employees, and is owned by Hayed Saeed Anam Group, a major Yemeni family-owned conglomerate.

The Houthi central bank said it ordered the raid after finding out that the bank is involved in illegal financial activities such as large speculation on hard currencies and smuggling money abroad.

Private banks and mobile firms have long complained about Houthi harassment and the installing of operatives in their companies to monitor their financial activities, accusing the rebels of fleecing them by imposing high taxes to fund their military activities.

"The Houthi observers have their own office inside all banks and exchange companies in their territories," an official at a private bank in Yemen told Arab News on Sunday.

Despite Houthi raids and charges, local observers and bank officials doubted that Tadamon Bank or any other major company would move to Aden, given the fact that most of their customers are from the densely populated areas in Houthi-controlled territories. The continuing tension between the government and the pro-independence Southern Transitional Council that led to sporadic clashes in southern provinces has also discouraged companies from moving.

Another reason for not relocating is the fear of Houthi reprisals. "The bank is afraid of meeting the fate of Sabafon," an employee at Tadamon Bank said, referring to a major Yemeni mobile operator that relocated its main offices and operations from Houthi-held Sanaa to Aden in September. The Houthis punished Sabafon by banning other companies and landlines from calling its subscribers and cutting off Internet services. The Houthis reopened the company in Sanaa after seizing control of the companies' servers and computers and issued new SIM cards.

Abdullah Al-Awadhi, a Sabafon spokesman, said on Saturday that the company did not regret moving operations to government-controlled Aden despite heavy losses. "The company relocated to Aden due to nationalist and morale motives," Al-Awadhi said, urging other mobile firms to leave Sanaa to avoid Houthi extortion and harassment.

Economists have called for financial companies and whole banking sectors in

Yemen to be kept neutral, warning against huge economic repercussions due to the war between the Aden-based central bank and the Houthi-controlled central bank in Sanaa and Houthi raids on banks.

Studies Economic Media Center (SEMC), a Yemeni think tank, criticized the Houthis for raiding banks and abducting their officials, warning that such steps would harm the reputation of the Yemeni banking sector and exacerbate the current dire humanitarian crisis.

“This is a dangerous step that will lead to disastrous repercussions at the local, regional and international levels and will affect the reputation of the Yemeni banking sector, local economy and people’s living,” the center said.



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US confirms its continued support to the Central Bank of Yemen Boat carrying 1,000 kg of drugs seized by Yemeni Coast Guard

Jordan confronts tribal shooting tradition

Sat, 2020-11-14 21:34

AMMAN: The Kingdom of Jordan is looking for ways to eliminate the celebratory tribal practice of shooting firearms in the air following several high-profile incidents.

The national debate on the issue came to a head on Wednesday after groups of people celebrated the victory of local leaders in the country's 19th parliamentary elections.

Celebrations kicked off as the country faced the first day of a total lockdown, which was issued after a spike in coronavirus cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

The celebrations, which were filmed and distributed on social media, were met with widespread condemnation by the public, many of which who endured the lockdown at home.

King Abdullah, using his official Twitter account, labeled the actions a "clear violation of the law and an act against the health and safety of society." He added that the "law should be applied to all without exception."

The royal comment produced quick results, with the country's Minister of Interior resigning and Jordanian security forces completing a massive campaign to collect unlicensed weapons.

Police chief Hussein Hawatmeh told Jordan's Al-Mamlaka TV that 18 parliamentary candidates and 324 citizens were arrested with weapons. He said 29 weapons were confiscated and 478 vehicles were being searched for.

Jordan's police say that no records are kept of victims who die from stray bullets in mass celebrations. Al-Mamlaka TV estimated that from 2013 to 2018, between 1,500 and 1,869 people died in such incidents, while the injury rate was far higher.

Bashir Daaja, former Jordanian police spokesman and security expert, told Arab News that the act of celebratory shooting is part of a tribal tradition.

"This act has been inherited from previous generations and was started when communities had to personally protect themselves and therefore owned weapons. On happy occasions they would shoot in the air, allowing tribal leaders to exhibit their firepower."

HIGHLIGHT

Celebratory tribal practice of shooting firearms were met with widespread

condemnation by the public, many of which who endured the lockdown at home.

Daaja said there is no longer a need for local communities to protect themselves in the presence of a strong government.

Mamoun Abu Nowar, a retired Jordanian Air Force general, told Arab News that there is no need for the “exaggerated situation” where “so many people own all kinds of weapons and use them in this way.”

Abu Nowar called for the country to make a decisive choice between tribal and civil society. “We can’t have a civil country and tribalism at the same time.”

Social scientist Hussein Al-Khazalleh told Arab News that celebratory gunfire is a cultural issue, but that issue stems from deeper tribal concerns.

“People had come from desert life and they needed to protect themselves from outsiders,” he said. Weapons were handed down and became part of societal pride, Al-Khazalleh added.

“The weapons are now used to remind the central government of their political presence and their importance. They are saying ‘we are here and you must remember us.’”

Al-Khazalleh said the rise in unemployment and the absence of economic development has led young people back to tribal life. “They feel that the tribe can provide a safety net more than the government can.”

Marwan Muasher, former Jordanian deputy prime minister, told Arab News that he does not believe the issue stems from a tribal problem.

“We make a mistake by saying that this is a case of tribal society. After 100 years since the establishment of Jordan, the citizens have a right to demand the rule of law without discrimination.”

Jordanian government sources have said that more than 1 million unlicensed weapons are kept by people mostly outside Jordan’s major cities.

One of the problems facing regulators are the country’s lax weapon laws.

Bashir Daaja, a former police spokesman, said the the possession of an unlicensed weapon is only a misdemeanor. “That means the punishment is the confiscation of the weapon and a 25 Jordanian dinar (\$35) fine.”

Daaja said regulators should make the possession of unlicensed firearms a felony, which is subject to three years’ imprisonment.



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Jordan's interior minister resigns after outcry over breaches in COVID-19 lockdown

Boat carrying 1,000 kg of drugs seized by Yemeni Coast Guard

Author:

Sat, 2020-11-14 21:22

AL-MUKALLA: The Yemeni Coast Guard in the eastern province of Mahra on Friday intercepted a boat carrying almost 1,000 kilograms of drugs and arrested six Iranian and Pakistani sailors.

The government-run Mahra Media Centre said that local coastguards, backed by Arab coalition forces in the province, seized the boat off the coast of Mahra, arresting six sailors on board.

In the province's Nishtoun port, where the seized boat was forced to dock, security forces found 730 kilograms of cannabis resin and 216 kilograms of crystal methamphetamine, tightly bound in plastic bags.

The seized drugs are worth \$6,600,000, and investigators are currently questioning the sailors to determine where the drugs came from and their final destination.

The center quoted Ahmed Ali Rafet, a local security officer, as saying that security forces in the province have been put on heightened alert to foil any other attempt to smuggle drugs into Yemen through the province's coast, urging locals to alert them about similar shipments of drugs or arms.

The latest announcement about the seized drugs comes as the Arab coalition works to revive the Yemeni coastal authority, which had crumbled when the Houthis seized control of Sanaa and later expanded militarily across Yemen six years ago.

The coalition has trained and armed hundreds of guards and provided them with fast boats. The forces have been deployed along the country's long coastline.

Yemeni military and security officials say that the Houthis receive their smuggled shipments of arms through many coastal points on the Red Sea and the Arab Sea, including some informal ports in the province of Mahra.

In September, members of a detained arms ring that had smuggled Iranian weapons to the Houthis for years confessed that they had disguised themselves as fishermen in Mahra, where they transported many shipments of arms from Iran to the Houthis through different locations in the province.

Dozens of Houthis and government forces have been killed in the continuing fighting in the provinces of Marib, Juf and Sanaa since Thursday, local army commanders and media reports said.

Yemen's Defense Ministry said on Friday that at least three dozen Houthis had been killed in heavy fighting in the mountainous Nehim district, in the province of Sanaa.

State media broadcast footage showing what appeared to be government forces trading heavy machine guns with the Houthis as smoke billowed from the battlefield.

Warplanes from the Arab coalition reportedly supported government troops by hitting Houthi gatherings and military equipment.

The ministry said the Houthis lost several armored vehicles and heavy military equipment in the fighting in Nehim.

In the neighboring Marib province, the commander of the 7th Military Region has vowed to keep fighting until the Houthis are defeated, denying media reports that the Houthis had recaptured a military base in the province.

Maj. Gen. Ahmed Hassan Jibran said that the Houthis suffered major defeats on the battlefield in Marib, adding that the strategic Mas military base was still under the control of government forces.

Last week, Houthi media outlets said their forces seized control of the Mas military base, northwest of Marib, publishing images of their fighters chanting their slogans inside a military base.

Gen. Jibran said the Houthis fabricated the images to “compensate” for their losses on the battlefields. State media did not elaborate on the deaths of government forces during the fighting.

For several months, the Houthis have been relentlessly attacking army troops and allied tribesmen in Marib in an attempt to break defense lines before invading major oil and gas facilities in the province.

The current bloody conflict in Yemen began in late 2014 when the Houthis seized control of the capital, Sanaa, forcing Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi into decamping to Aden and later fleeing the country after Houthi militias bombed the presidential palace in the city.

A massive aerial bombardment by the Arab coalition shored up government forces, enabling them to reverse Houthi gains across the country.



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Arab coalition hands Hadramout role to Yemen coast guard
Yemeni coast guards block ports in protest

Egypt launches 'revolutionary' e-invoice system

Sat, 2020-11-14 21:17

CAIRO: Egypt is set to launch a groundbreaking electronic invoice (e-invoice) system on Sunday.

Minister of Finance Mohamed Maaait announced the launch of the first phase of the electronic billing system, which will be the first in the country's history.

The minister said several companies will join the system in succession until the end of June 2021, adding that the program is an important step in digital transformation as part of Egypt Vision 2030.

It is also a major step in developing the tax system and raising the efficiency of tax examination, which contributes to reclaiming the rights of the state's public treasury in a way that helps achieve financial and economic goals. It will also enable Egypt to complete its development path and improve citizens' standard of living.

Maaait said the e-invoice system will "revolutionize" integration between the tax system and the commercial community, in order to "transform the informal economy into the formal economy."

He added that Egypt is one of the countries leading the way in the Arab world in implementing an e-invoice system as part of a digital transformation project. The minister said the system has been closely followed and supported by the country's political leadership.

SPEEDREAD

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Maaait said the Ministry of Finance and the Tax Authority will provide support to companies for compulsory entry into the e-invoice system. He warned that legal measures will be taken against companies that refuse entry, including prosecution in accordance with the provisions of the new unified tax procedures law.

The minister said the new system will allow the instant exchange of data for invoices in digital form.

He said the e-invoicing will help the digital transformation of commercial

transactions and will use cutting-edge technology that will formally validate the data of sources, recipients and invoice contents.

The new system is also set to bring further benefits, including increased limitations on Egypt's black market and informal economy, Maaait added.

According to the latest economic census by Egypt's Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, the size of the informal economy included 53 percent of the country's businesses, which employ about 4 million, or 29.3 percent of the workforce.

The volume of money invested in the sector amounted to 69.3 billion Egyptian pounds (\$4.4 billion), representing about 5.1 percent of the paid-up capital of Egypt's total economic activity.

Egyptian economists and finance experts estimate the size of the informal economy in Egypt at \$395 billion – about 50 percent of the country's economy.

The informal economy, represented by mostly small, medium and micro-sized enterprises, is not subject to quality or tax supervision.

Informal or black market businesses are spread across Egypt in the form of street vendors, markets, food carts, restaurants, factories and unlicensed real estate.



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treasure trove of over 100 sarcophagi