



Saadettin Ergeç was officially welcomed in Ankara by President Abdullah Gül

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INTERVIEW WITH IRAQI TURKMEN FRONT CHAIRMAN SAADETTIN ERGEÇ

Abstract

As Iraq is entering a critical phase, ORSAM held an interview with Iraqi Turkmen Front Chairman Saadettin Ergeç on December 25 at the ITF Turkish representative office about the future of the Turkmen society in Iraq. Ergeç shared his opinions regarding politics in Iraq, the electoral law, pre-electoral alliances, developments in Kirkuk, the situation of the Turkmens and relations between Turkey and Turkmens.

Iraqi Turkmens are peaceful people who stay away from weapons and respect human rights. They favor the unity of the state. Unfortunately it appears that these are not popular qualities in Iraq. In the past we couldn't speak of Saddam's oppressions and intimidations because it was considered as a crime. People who spoke were imprisoned or executed. Today we can speak but no one would listen. Still we are being patient and struggle for the future.

ORSAM: Dear Ergeç, what has changed in Turkmen politics since you took Office?

ERGEÇ: We experienced some unexpected developments after I took office in 2003. We were expecting 2003 to be a good year. You know why? From the establishment of the Iraqi Republic until 2003, the governments' perceptions and political approaches towards the Iraqi Turkmens never changed. This was because the Iraqi Turkmen identity never came to the fore and Turkmens were excluded from the political process. We believe that all these happened for a reason. What are the advantages and disadvantages of a strong Turkmen community in Iraq? Would others consider them as a part of the new Iraqi State? Unlikely! That's why nothing changed until 2003.

In order to evaluate the post-2003 era, we need to take look at the past. Turkmens were under great pressure, especially in the Saddam era. I don't need to mention the massacres and bloodshed of the past here, everyone knows them. To my opinion all suppressions and intimidations of that era were part of genocide. One doesn't need to kill people literally. Forcing people to deny their identities and nationalities, registering them as Arabs, disqualifying them from buying lands or selling their lands to their brothers; these are also part of genocide. That's why, 2003 was a brand new start for us. We were expecting too much. Unfortunately, suppressions, intimidations and attacks continued after 2003. Efforts have been made to prevent Turkmens to become stronger. Our people struggled a lot, they faced many difficulties. They continued to suffer as the result of the US support to the Kurdish pesh-

merga and the plans of Kurdish political groups to reach their goals. Iraq was drifted into an enormous state of chaos. Security and political gaps occurred. The absence of Arab dominancy was replaced by the Kurdish peshmerga and US troops. They proceeded to realize their plans. They made great demographic changes on the pretext of normalization.

When the occupation began in 2003, I was asked to be the representative of the Iraqi Turkmen Front Kirkuk Office (ITF). My nation gave me the responsibility and since that day, I always considered democracy as my only instrument. As you know, Kirkuk is the center of the Turkmen national efforts as its history is full of struggle. Kirkuk paid the price for its status. Turkmens are prone to democracy, more than any other nation in Iraq. They don't engage in armed struggles. According to the Turkmens, democracy means deriving rights through legal procedure. That was our aim. But the powers that claimed to bring us democracy have shown us that democracy is at the barrel of a gun. Only those who possess greater power can enjoy democracy. But we still believe in democracy, we trust in democracy. Democracy has different methods and once it is fully settled it will be able to overcome weapons. We will continue to pursue our path. I opted for the use of democratic rights since the day I took office. We established NGO's, we organized demonstrations in Baghdad; we showed our reactions and staged hunger strikes to stop the unfair treatments, but they didn't stop. Our demonstrations were subject to attacks. 5 Turkmens have died in the Tuzkhurmatu demonstrations of 2004, 6 died in the Pre-

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fecture Demonstration in Kirkuk and more than 30 were injured. The Prefecture Demonstration where we have been attacked was the biggest in Turkmen history.

The Transitional Constitution was enacted in 2004 when I was in charge. We had expectations from that constitution but our expectations turned out empty. Kurds intruded in Kirkuk along with the Kurdish groups although they were not supposed to. The articles 53 and 58 were written upon this incident and articles dealing with Kirkuk were included in the constitution and disputed areas were defined. Disputed areas are defined for states that are engaged in a war. It is a great shame to define disputed areas for different nations of the same country. Still Kirkuk was constitutionalized as a disputed area with article 58 for a reason; giving Kirkuk to the Kurds. We strongly opposed the articles 53 and 58. We made two great demonstrations in Baghdad when Baghdad's security situation was at worst state. Young Turkmens blocked the streets of Baghdad and staged hunger strike for one week. As a result, authorities made us promises which were soon forgotten.

Iraqi Turkmens are peaceful people who stay away from weapons and respect human rights. They favor the unity of the state. Unfortunately it appears that these are not popular qualities in Iraq. In the past we couldn't speak of Saddam's oppressions and intimidations because it was considered as a crime. People who spoke were imprisoned or executed. Today we can speak but no one would listen. Still we are being patient and struggle for the future. We try to reach to those who believe in human rights and democracy.

After the Transitional Constitution we asked for a census to be held before the 2004 elections. In fact, Kurdish groups ask for the same today, especially for Kirkuk. At that time our request was denied. We believe that we need to know the exact population to reach realistic figures. But at the time, the Ministry of Planning rejected our request for security reasons and stated that the ministry was not ready to hold a census. The

Minister of Planning of the time was Berham Saleh who is today a top level authority of the Kurdish Regional Government. That was a political decision because at the time Kirkuk's demographic structure wasn't changed and Turkmens were forming the majority.

Then the constitution was enacted which included the very dangerous article 140. Sunni Groups' and Turkmens' influence in the parliament was weak at the time. As a result of the authority gap, Kurdish groups managed to include that article into the constitution, but couldn't implement it within the constitutionally stipulated time frame. We studied the constitution in detail and strongly opposed the article 140. A constitution prepared in 3-4 months would normally have some flaws. Besides, Iraq never had a proper constitution since the time of establishment and it was in a state of chaos at the time. So, the constitution was accepted as a result of a so-called referendum with vague results. The constitution stated that if 3 provinces would vote "no" the constitution would be annulled. We know that it has been voted "no" especially in Mosul but Mosul was presented as if it approved the constitution.

The article 140 constituted of three stages which were normalization, census and election and was stipulated to be accomplished within a limited time frame. When we look back we see that they couldn't accomplish it within the schedule and the article was annulled. They turned the normalization process into anormalization. Reinstate of Turkmen lands confiscated by the former regime was supposed to be a part of normalization but 85% of these lands haven't been returned to their Turkmen owners yet. Kurds settled on these lands and don't intend to return them back. Remaining steps of the article 140 have not been implemented as normalization could not accomplish. Some still want to proceed although the deadline of the article was 31 December 2007. They need to make a constitution amendment in order to proceed but the amendment period which is 4 months after the adaptation of the constitution has expired as well. We did our best to prevent the implementation of article 140. We contacted international

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NGO's and the International Crisis Group. We explained the possible dangers. Our arguments have been approved by the Baker-Hamilton report and article 140 became invalid as a result of these efforts.

What do we have to in Kirkuk do about the elections? We have been mentioning that it would be a great mistake if elections will be held under current circumstances in Kirkuk. Wrong methods will lead to undesired results and instability in Iraq. After the adaptation of the federal law, elections in Kirkuk have been postponed to solve the issues. That means Kirkuk has a special status and elections will serve no good for no one under these circumstances.

We tried to raise the voice of the Turkmen community in the Iraqi Parliament. Turkmen are one of the three essential groups that formed Iraq. We should have the same rights as the Arabs and Kurds. There is still much work to do. The article 24 was adapted to this end but the article was strongly opposed by Kurdish groups. They made violent demonstrations on the streets of Kirkuk. The ITF center was attacked and burned in July 2008 during Kurdish demonstrations. This proves our righteousness. We still act sensible and look for a democratic solution. I was at the parliament that day and when I heard about the news I managed to make the parliament to suspend its endeavors and focus on Kirkuk. Article 24 was vetoed anyway. It shouldn't have been vetoed as there was nothing against the constitution. The President of Iraq should have favored the will of all Iraqis not only the will of a single group.

Still we managed to adopt article 23 which stipulates a work distribution on 32% basis. The first

act of this article was of particular importance. It stipulated the distribution of the top-three positions (governorship, deputy governorship and presidency of the city council) among the three major groups. The group that forms majority in the city council was supposed to chose among these positions. Thus the Kurds chose governorship while Arabs opted for deputy governorship. Presidency of the city council was left to the Turkmen. Then a committee for the implementation of article 23 was established. Mr. Mehmet Mehdi and I have become members of this committee. But the presidency of the council is not delivered to the Turkmen yet. We made claims to the parliament but the position is still occupied by the Kurds. This is unfair. Kurds are seizing our rights.

The article 23 of the local election law prevented a possible fait accompli situation in Kirkuk but there isn't any similar prevention in the election law. The election law cooperation among Iraqi groups of 2008 doesn't exist this time. No special status was set for Kirkuk. People in Kirkuk will vote according to the figures of 2009. It appears that the depredations you have mentioned are accepted. Besides, we all expected the re-discussion of the Kirkuk issue when the elections were postponed but the new law doesn't mention about Kirkuk. All amendments were made in favor of one group. Why?

In fact article 6 of the election law is about Kirkuk. It was the Kirkuk's status issue that caused the delay. The elections were scheduled for January 16. Negotiations and pressures have fastened the adaptation process of the law. Here the idea was that the elections were made to determine the parliament members and article 23

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ITF Chairman Saadettin Ergeç answered ORSAM's questions in all sincerity

is setting a base for Kirkuk's status. I don't agree. Assembly Chairman Eyad Samarrai once asked me why I insist about Kirkuk and said "a Turkmen MP will come from any other province even if not from Kirkuk why do you insist on Kirkuk? This parliament works for Iraq. The solution for Kirkuk lies in there not here". I stated that I wouldn't disagree and asked for the electoral register. "Let's suggest that 90% of this register is correct. That's all I want to believe". Number

of voters in Kirkuk was 369,000 in 2004. When Richard Armitage came, another 108,000 were added on the top of the list. We want to exclude those 108,000 voters and determine the number as based on natural demographic growth figures. The change in Kirkuk's borders is another issue. In every country of the World provincial borders can change and new provinces emerge to provide better service. The population of Chemchemal district has reached almost 600,000.

Our election campaign plan is ready; we determined our slogans, we are working on our strategies to overcome the deficiencies and to encourage our people. We have 22 NGO's within our organization and our aim is to visit every Turkmen home before the elections. Our only concern is about security and the protection of our people.

Attaching this district to Kirkuk is nothing but a political maneuver. Making Chemchamal a province would be the right thing to do. What is the benefit of attaching another 600,000 people to Kirkuk whose population is already more than one million? Iraq is growing bigger as a part of natural progress. There were 8 provinces in the 1920's, then it increased to 14 and now there are 18 provinces. I think there should be more. Tuzkhurmatu should be a province as well. But it doesn't for a reason. Turkmen cities are not made provinces.

A senior member of the Supreme Election Committee stated that the registers of the 2004 elections were destroyed. Election registers are not destroyed after elections, nowhere in the world. They are formal state documents. They are kept for records and used for the next elections after the new figures are added. Two days later she stated that the 2005 registers are destroyed as well. She also said that the registers were not prepared by them but by the UN. This is a great shame. There is no such excuse as "we destroyed them because they were not prepared by us". Registers of 2004-2009 are destroyed to deny the facts about the Turkmens. This is the fault of the assembly and commission chairmen, Eyad Samarraï in particular. He should have exerted his authority. Arabs and Turkmens have presented more than 10 suggestions but the Kurdish groups just object our proposals instead of submitting their own suggestions. They have nothing to propose. If a proposal is signed by a sufficient number of members it must be discussed in the parliament. Our suggestions regarding the elections were signed by 106 parliament members but the Kurds refused to discuss it and sent it to

the High Court of Justice as if it were against the constitution. They blamed us for intending to separate the country just like Northern Ireland which was not our intention. We suggested that the ballot boxes should be determined separately for Arab, Turkmen and the Kurdish neighborhoods in line with the article 23. Now the high court of justice states that the suggestion cannot be accepted in case it was prepared with the purpose of creating ethnic division. They asked us and we explained that it is not our intention to create ethnic division but they wouldn't listen.

The US also makes a great pressure to hold elections immediately. In fact elections are supposed to hold once in every 4 years. The parliament will not be legitimate anymore as of March 16, 2010.

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The article states that the election registers will be prepared by considering the registers of 2005-2009. Elections will base on these registers. After the elections a commission will be established to examine the results in Kirkuk. That means you cannot prevent the elections in Kirkuk. But by considering the distortions made on the registers, we can easily forecast the results. The MP profiles of Kirkuk will be shaped according to the election results. How will you change this fact?

The law allows us to change the MP profile. The parliament members elected for Kirkuk will not

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be declared as Kirkuk MP's in the beginning. The ultimate results will be declared in one year after detailed inspection. For example if 2 out of the 12 Kirkuk MP's are elected with the votes of those from another region, those two MP's will be declared as MP's of Iraq, not Kirkuk. Secondly, the registers of 2009 elections cannot be used for another election, especially not for Kirkuk. Kirkuk has a special status in this respect. The election results cannot be used to determine Kirkuk's future in terms of administration. On the other hand, the second article of the law determines the actual borders that means; we will be able to exclude the excess growth. At this point the question is; were the 2005 election results legitimate?

Results were controversial

You are right. At the time, the population of Kirkuk was 609,000 and number of MP's was 9. Today, population is 800,000 and 12 MP's are to be elected. Fewer votes are needed today, this is worrisome. Besides the new generation youth are eligible to vote now which means the number of voters will increase even more. I believe that maintaining security is the most important factor here. A well organized group of observers is needed. We need the help of the UN, USA and Turkey. In the 2005 elections some persons have voted 45 times. We determined their names but no one would care. We need to protect our ballots well. Besides, if security is maintained, people would feel safe to go and vote, otherwise they wouldn't. Turkmen participation remains low. We can compensate the previous unjustness if we can encourage the Turkmens to go to the ballots. We did our best to make Kirkuk mentioned in this law and we managed to do it despite Kurdish opposition. It is very difficult to reach consensus about such matters in Iraq. As a consequence, some mistakes and delays occurred. Still I believe that Turkmens have increased their gains in the Kirkuk issue at 50%. Now, all we have to do is to encourage people to go to the ballots. Turkmen participation in the last elections was 30-35% we need to increase it to 70%.

Who will count the votes and how? This is also an important matter isn't it?

This is a matter of security. Effective security measures are needed. Am I secure when I go the ballots? No! Are the registers corrected? No! Am I taking the ballots to the election center? No! Am I counting the votes? No! So what should I expect from this election? I need to be integrated into this system. I should be a part of the whole process. Those who are in charge of the ballots should be impartial. The BM should act impartial. Impartial observers from neighbor countries and NGO's are needed. Iraq is having hard times. Instability, murder and kidnappings are prevalent. Besides, we are entering into a new era. We need a control mechanism to overcome these circumstances and to me, the UN, USA and Turkey are part of this control mechanism. I want to feel safe when I participate in the elections.

Counting of the votes is an important issue but participation is as important as the election itself. You stated that Turkmen participation in the elections remain low. What do you do about this and what do you expect from this election?

We made efforts to gather all Turkmen candidates on one list but our idea was not favored. Turkmen candidates preferred to be participate in different lists. We believed in Turkmen unity rather than establishing coalitions with other groups. In order to become stronger, other coalitions could be avoided at least until the election law was enacted. There is an implementation named the "compensatory seats" which I oppose. According to this, 15% of the 310 parliament members are given seats to maintain balance among groups. That means; 45 candidates will be granted to join the parliament as balancing factors. Turkmen candidates believed that participating in different lists would increase their changes to get a compensatory seat. So they made coalitions with other groups. I suggested waiting until the election law is enacted. In fact we learned that the ratio of compensatory seats was reduced to 5% in the new election law. That means 15 candidates will receive compen-

satory seats. 10 out of those 15 seats are already given to Duhok, Suleimaniyah and the minorities. Now we have 5 seats for the greater parties which to my opinion should be used to balance the number of female representatives. So, according to this calculation what are the chances of the Turkmen representatives? Do you believe that Turkmen will receive a seat? Turkmen candidates remained dispersed in different lists as the result of this wrong strategy. That's why the number of our representatives may be few. Still, we can be considered as replacements for the empty seats in the future. Besides, we have the chance to participate in the government. Our representatives can be ministers, deputy ministers or undersecretaries. This way we can generate employment for our young people and create a stronger voter base. ITF waited to declare its coalition decisions until the last minute. We are aware that we have to take part in coalitions in order to achieve success in some specific regions such as in Mosul, Diyala, Salahaddin and Baghdad. In Kirkuk we could walk alone. But if I would be the sole candidate for Kirkuk the Iraqi List could not present a candidate for the same province. Similarly we could not present our candidates for provinces where the Iraqi List is nominating their own candidates. So we decided to go together and support each other. The Iraqi List was the best partner for us. We balance each other. We are providing support to them in the Turkmen regions where we are strong, -even stronger than the other Turkmen parties- and they can support us in their regions. Besides the local election results indicate that the Iraqi List is the strongest list in Iraq and they most likely will participate in the government formation. If they manage to get the PM position, our chances will increase accordingly.

So do you believe that the Iraqi List will be the winning coalition? PM Nuri al-Maliki's Constitutional State List seems to be strong as well.

I believe that the Iraqi List will be the winning coalition. The US surveys in Iraq indicate the same. The list comprises different groups and that makes it strong. It is called the "greatest list"

by the Iraqis. The Iraqi List is consists of 20 organizations. Those organizations are formed by other smaller organizations. For example Eyad Allawi's organization is made up of 39 organizations. ITF isn't alone either. We are supported by the Turkmen Nationalist Movement, Nationalist Turkmen Community and People's Foundation. The ITF nominated candidates in Arbil and Suleimaniyah alone as the Iraqi List didn't present candidates for these provinces.

So, how many Turkmen Representatives will we see in the Iraqi Parliament and how many of them will be the members of ITF?

Our hope is to get 10-15 seats but it is hard to mention a certain number. Iraq's conditions may change any minute. But we are working hard to reach our aim. We established commissions and local organizations. Our election campaign plan is ready; we determined our slogans, we are working on our strategies to overcome the deficiencies and to encourage our people. We have 22 NGO's within our organization and our aim is to visit every Turkmen home before the elections. Our only concern is about security and the protection of our people.

After the elections, the government formation process will begin. You stated that Eyad Allawi is your favorite but still it's unlikely that he will form the government alone. Do you think that the pre-electoral coalitions will survive during the government formation process, or should we expect new coalitions?

Yes you should. Negotiations will start during that process. Each group will try to win the other one over. What we have to do is to avoid breakaways and make efforts to maintain our alliances.

When we consider the incidents in Mosul, Kirkuk and Diyala we can easily expect problems to occur between the Hadba Party of your coalition, the Kurds and Turkmen.

It is not just a matter of opposition. Iraqi coalitions are made up of different groups and organi-

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zations. For example there are different fractions among Kurdish groups such as the Communists and Islamists. Here I want to mention that we have no issues with the Kurdish people. Maybe some of them will even vote for us. Our problem is political. There are too many organizations and parties in Iraq. Coalitions are formed to reduce the number of these organizations and parties. Many of them will probably disappear if the Political Parties Law will be introduced in the future.

Who do you think will be the second party?

The Constitutional State Coalition or the National Alliance.

Can we say that the Constitutional State Coalition's chances are high, when we consider the results of the local elections?

Local elections shouldn't be considered as a reference here. You are living in a democratic environment but here in Iraq circumstances are different. Taking up a position is both advantageous and disadvantageous for a leader. You will have to deal with problems if you cannot keep your promises. Voters are impatient; they expect immediate response to the promises they were given. Recent attacks and bombings indicate that the security issues are not solved yet. Some blame the government for these incidents. I don't mean to say The government is losing favor.

The timing of Allawi's re-appearance is significant in this respect, especially when we consider his relations with USA. Can you draw a picture of the post-invasion era in Iraq? Do you think that security will be maintained after withdrawal or will Iraq drift into a state of chaos again?

USA wants a strong leader for Iraq. Iraq needs a strong system as well. It is true that the conflicts are continuing but despite the recent incidents, there is visible improvement in Iraq since 2005. Still, there is much work to do. Of course there is the possibility of a chaos after the withdrawal.

But we must not forget that some of the violence Iraq is caused by the US presence itself.

Allawi has already been Prime Minister once and he wasn't very successful in maintaining security. He seems to be a strong figure but don't you ever doubt that he may fail to maintain stability in the future?

No one can guarantee to provide security in Iraq. But we have to consider the process. There is a progress; that means he may be able to do it now, although he failed in the past. New steps can be taken. We believe that USA should withdraw as soon as possible and Iraq should take the responsibility. USA introduced us democracy now it's time for us to make use of it.

Who will provide security in the elections?

The Iraqi Security forces will. Maybe US forces will provide them with assistance. The most significant issue for us is the peshmerga presence in Kirkuk. Although it is not legal, 100 peshmergas were brought to Kirkuk a few days ago. Their numbers may be not too many, but there are already 4000 peshmergas in Kirkuk. They are considered illegal but the presence of 100 legitimate peshmerga in Kirkuk will encourage and legitimize the others. According to the constitution the peshmerga forces are supposed to remain above the blue line. But Raymond Odierno, the US Commanding General is allowing the peshmerga forces to stay in the US bases and receive training there. The peshmerga forces are staying in the US bases in Kirkuk and will be allowed to protect our ballots. That is worrying. Terror incidents in Turkmen settlements such as Tal'afar, Tuzkhurmatu, Tazekhurmatu and Kirkuk are recently increasing; especially in settlements where the entire population is Turkmen. The offenders are never found. Turkmen should have the power to protect themselves but I'm not talking about militia power. Turkmen politicians under the authority of the Iraqi State and Turkmen units to protect the innocent civilians and the ballot boxes should care about this matter. Such practice has proved successful in other regions of Iraq before.

How are your relations with other Iraqi communities such as the Yazidi's, Shabaks, Assyrians and Kurds?

We don't have any problems with the Kurdish people; we have some issues with the Kurdish groups. They have a certain approach towards us. The problems are political. Otherwise why would they establish some made-up parties and introduce them as Turkmen parties? They do it to the Yazidi's and Shabak's too. To oppress them, they even claim that Yazidi's and Shabaks are of Kurdish origin. Things may change in the future. Kurdish politic movements are not monopolized anymore. One of the major groups is falling apart. The other one is still holding pressure. This group knows the old methods well; it pursues a policy of oppression and intimidation through weapons on both their own people and others to be able to manipulate them.

What are your expectations from the Turks living outside Iraq? Do you want them to come back to Iraq? What is your ultimate goal?

Of course we want our people to come back but first we need to provide a stable environment. Those people are settled abroad, they have a life there we can't expect them to return in a short term. People want to have a better living, that's why we need to make Iraq a better place. Our brothers went to USA or Germany to have a better life; they would consider returning to their homeland if Iraq becomes a more attractive place. We hope that Iraq will become a stable place where basic services can be provided and people can live in comfort and peace. We are the poor keepers of a rich country. This can change if we can make the most of our resources. For now it is not possible. Still we are in contact with our people living abroad. The world has become a global village; we don't need to live in the same

place to act in unity. We want them to support our case. If they can unite we can unite too.

What are your expectations from the Turkish People?

All that we want from Turkey is their interest and moral support. Besides, Turkey can help us to provide security in the region. Turkey has an influence on Iraq, Northern Iraq in particular. 80% of the North Iraqi infrastructure is made by Turkey. Turkey supported Northern Iraq since 1991 but nothing is done for Kirkuk. We have national and historical bonds with Turkey. That's why we expect much. We are in the middle of a very critical process right now. There are issues about Kirkuk. There will be an election. We provided proofs for all the unjust treatments of the past elections but no one took them into consideration. Here the weapons are talking and since we refused to become an armed power no one listened to us. Weapons are powerful but cruel. One can reach justice through cruelty. Our future is being destroyed, our rights are seized and Turkey should take these facts into consideration, it should defend us. That's what we expect from Turkey.

Would it be advantageous for you if Turkey would send observers to Iraqi elections?

Turkey must send observers. But observers are not enough to prevent the intrigues. The transportation of ballot boxes and counting of the votes are the most important phases. We have been through these before, after the 2005 elections we found our voting papers floating in the Hassa River. Our votes are our future; we need to protect them.

Thank you for giving us your valuable time. We wish you success in your case.

We see this as a support to our case. This is an opportunity to raise our voice and make it perceptible to others.

I wish you success as well. ▣