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Abstract

On 10 August 2014, in the first popular election of the Turkish President in the history of the Republic, Prime Minister and Justice and Development Party (AKP) candidate Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected in the first round with 51.79 percent of the vote. Highlighting the growing social and political polarization in the country, this paper analyses the results of the elections and the regional distribution of votes for the AKP and contending candidates through a comparison with previous electoral results in the country. Finally the analysis addresses the significance of the presidential elections for the future of Turkish politics and Turkey's democratic system.

On 10 August 2014, in the first popular election of the Turkish President in the history of the Republic, Prime Minister and Justice and Development Party (AKP) candidate Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected in the first round with 51.79 percent of the vote. The other candidates, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, the joint candidate of the Republican People's Party (RPP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), garnered 38.44 percent while Selahattin Demirtaş, candidate for the Kurdish Democracy Party of Peoples (HDP), secured 9.78 percent. Voter turnout (74.12 percent) was considerably lower than in all recent parliamentary elections: 1999-87.1 percent; 2002-79.1 percent; 2007-84.2 percent; 2011-83.2 percent. It was also much lower than the almost 90 percent registered in the most recent local elections of 30 March 2014. Turnout was also lower than expected among Turkish citizens living abroad who for the first time had the opportunity to vote from third countries. Thus, according to unofficial figures, among the almost 3 million Turks living abroad,

only about 232.000 voted, in addition to another 270.000 who voted at the border gates.¹

Various explanations were offered for the low turnout. One was the timing of the elections. It was argued that many summer vacationers did not bother to return from their vacation. Many seasonal workers also apparently did not vote, given that their work brings them to places far from where they are registered to cast their ballots. Secondly, many CHP and MHP voters who were apparently unhappy about the choice of their joint candidate İhsanoğlu, demonstrated their displeasure by choosing not to vote. Thirdly, many leading pre-election surveys showed Erdoğan to be a sure winner with about 56-58 percent of the vote, a margin that may have discouraged a number of potential opposition voters to vote.

Another much debated aspect of the elections was that as Prime Minister, Erdoğan could use government resources and facilities freely in his campaign, while the campaigns for the two opposition candidates were poorly financed. Furthermore, the state-owned Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) heavily concentrated on the Erdoğan campaign, granting almost no room to the opposition candidates. Thus, the playing field was markedly "uneven" in the words of Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, the authors of an insightful book on "competitive authoritarianism." They argue that "a degree of incumbent advantage - in the form of patronage jobs, pork-barrel spending, clientelist social policies, and privileged access to media and finance - exists in all democracies. In democracies, however, these advantages do not seriously undermine the opposition's capacity to compete. When incumbent manipulation of state institutions and resources is so excessive and one-sided that it seriously limits political competition, it is incompatible with democracy. [...] Three aspects of an uneven playing field are of particular importance: access

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1 Türker Karapınar, "Yurtdışı oyları gümrük artırdı", in *Milliyet*, 11 August 2014, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/d/t.aspx?ID=1923899>.

to resources, media, and the law.”²

The first two aspects of an uneven playing field are clearly relevant to present-day Turkey, while there seems to be no problem with regard to the conduct of elections. However, the playing field cannot be considered even with regard to some other aspects of the broader legal/judicial setting, such as restrictions on the freedom of expression, and the governments’ recent attempts to curve the independence of the judiciary. The High Council of Elections, solely responsible for the conduct of elections and giving final decisions with regard to electoral complaints, is a truly independent body with a solid constitutional status. All of its members are chosen by the two high courts from among their own members. Thus, Turkey at present seems to be on the borderline between competitive authoritarian regimes and the otherwise flawed or defective democracies.

Opinions vary as to the meaning of the election results. No doubt, Erdoğan and the pro-government media presented it as a smashing victory. In fact, however, it was a less impressive victory than they had predicted or desired. A slightly higher turnout would probably have carried the elections to the second (run-off) round. In a run-off between Erdoğan and İhsanoğlu, however, Erdoğan would be a clear winner, since he would get a majority of the Kurdish votes that went to Demirtaş in the first round. Indeed, a post-election poll showed that in the event of a run-off, 62.3 percent of Demirtaş’s votes would go to Erdoğan and only 8.7 percent to İhsanoğlu, with 29 percent not likely to vote at all.³ This shows the dilemma of Kurdish voters. Even though they do not fully trust Erdoğan, they still see him as their best (and only) chance for a peaceful solution to Turkey’s decade old conflict with its Kurdish minority.

Much debate has also been going on within the opposition camp, especially within the CHP. Many CHP figures belonging to the ultra-Kemalist wing of the party expressed discontent with İhsanoğlu’s candidacy, a highly respected nonpartisan figure with an academic and diplomatic background and conservative center-right leanings. Many of them therefore boycotted the campaign and election. On the other hand, some leftist CHP voters apparently voted for Demirtaş rather than for İhsanoğlu finding him too conservative for their liking. Thus, it is estimated that some 8.4 percent of those who voted for the CHP in the 30 March local elections voted for Demirtaş in the presidential elections. An even more surprising shift took place among the MHP voters. According to the same post-election poll, 15.9 percent of



them voted for Erdoğan.⁴ These survey findings are also supported by quantitative analysis of voting data. Thus, the total CHP-MHP vote in the 30 March elections was 43 percent (27.8 percent for the former and 15.2 percent for the latter), whereas their joint candidate in the presidential elections received only 38.44 percent, indicating a rather significant defection from both parties. The government as well as many independent observers portrayed it as a humiliating defeat for the collaboration strategy of the two parties. On the other hand, in an alliance between two parties with highly different ideologies and political histories, defections are unavoidable. Despite all these adverse circumstances, the collaboration of these two parties (and twelve other minor parties) in defense of the rule of law and of democratic standards is in itself a significant event that foretells well for the future of Turkish democracy.

The regional distribution of party votes was almost a replica of the 30 March local elections.⁵ Once again, Turkey is divided into three regional as well as social blocs. The CHP-MHP alliance is the clear winner in Eastern Thrace and in the coastal provinces of the Aegean and Mediterranean regions, while the HDP candidate Demirtaş was the frontrunner in the Kurdish-dominated Southeast. The rest of the country, including Central and Eastern Anatolia and the Black Sea region, was solid AKP territory. This regional distribution also corresponds to a socio-economic and cultural cleavage in Turkish politics. The alliance (more precisely, the CHP) strongholds are the most modernized regions of the country, with a higher level of economic welfare, educational attainment, and a more secular way of life. The same cleavage is also observed within the three largest metropolitan centers, İstanbul, Ankara and İzmir. Within these centers, CHP strongholds are represented by the older, more established, coastal neighborhoods of better-educated, middle and high income residents with a distinctly secular way of life, while the AKP appeals to poorer

2 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism. Hybrid Regimes After The Cold War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 6 and 10.

3 Adil Gür, “Erdoğan 2. turda daha çok oy alırdı”, in *Milliyet*, 15 August 2014, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/d/t.aspx?ID=1925837>.

4 Ibidem.

5 Ergun Özbudun, “The Meaning of the 30 March 2014 Local Elections in Turkey”, in *Middle East Insights*, No. 112 (6 June 2014), <https://meisingapore.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/download-insight-112-occ88zbudun.pdf>.

neighborhoods of largely recent urban migrants who are more religiously conservative and less well-educated.⁶ Thus, both elections confirm the sharply divided and largely compartmentalized nature of Turkish politics. Indeed, especially since the Gezi Park (Taksim Square) events of June 2013, Erdoğan and AKP spokesmen in general have increasingly used an exceedingly harsh and exclusionary rhetoric against the opposition, presumably with the aim of solidifying and mobilizing support among their own voters. Such polarization reached its peak in the 30 March and 10 August elections.

The only notable difference between the 30 March and 10 August elections is the shift of some of the MHP voters to Erdoğan. Taking two MHP strongholds as examples, in Osmaniye (the home province of the MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli) the MHP won 43.63 percent of the vote in 30 March as opposed to 37.57 percent for the AKP, with 13.15 percent for the CHP. In the presidential election, İhsanoğlu got 48.59 percent (about the same as Erdoğan), lower than the total CHP-MHP vote in March. Similarly, in Aksaray, another MHP stronghold, the total for the MHP and CHP was 39.52 percent in March, but İhsanoğlu got only 24.5 percent, while Erdoğan raised the AKP vote from 54.44 to 74 percent.⁷ Whether this indicates a permanent trend or is an exceptional deviation remains to be seen.

Despite all its controversial aspects, the presidential elections constitute a clear victory for Erdoğan and the AKP. The AKP has clearly established itself as the “predominant party” with three consecutive victories in parliamentary elections, each time with a larger share of the votes (2002, 2007 and 2011), three general local elections (2004, 2009 and 2014), two constitutional referendums (2007 and 2010), and finally the presidential elections of 2014.⁸ Furthermore, it is the only truly national party with a significant level of support in all parts of the country, including the Kurdish-dominated Southeast where it is in a vigorous competition with the Kurdish nationalist HDP and where the CHP and the MHP are practically nonexistent. In none of the eleven geographical regions of Turkey, did Erdoğan’s vote fall below the 40 percent level. Even in the Southeastern region taken as a whole, he got 50.6 percent of the vote as opposed to 38.5 percent for the HDP candidate Demirtaş.⁹

6 For an analysis of 30 March local elections in İstanbul, “39 başkandan 12 isim yeni sadece biri kadın”, in *Milliyet*, 3 April 2014, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/d/t.aspx?ID=1861344>. For a similar analysis of the presidential election results, Mert İnen, “İstanbul’da Tablo Değişmedi”, in *Milliyet*, 11 August 2014, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/d/t.aspx?ID=1923901>.

7 Sedat Ergin, “MHP’s rise of March 30 has been halted”, in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 21 August 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=449&nID=70687&NewsCatID=428>.

8 Ergun Özbudun, *Party Politics and Social Cleavages in Turkey*, Boulder and London, Lynne Rienner, 2013, p. 97-99.

9 Bekir Ağırdır, “Çankaya seçimini etkileyen 2’nci dinamik kutuplaşma”, in *Hürriyet*, 13 August 2014, <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/haber.aspx?id=26993827&tarih=2014-08-13>. See

It is beyond the scope of this essay to present a detailed analysis of the factors behind the rise of the AKP and its current predominance. However, the insightful comments of Jan-Werner Mueller of Princeton University on contemporary populist regimes, such as Hungary under Victor Orban, Venezuela under the late Hugo Chavez, and Turkey under Erdoğan are worth quoting. Thus, argues Mueller, “populism is a thoroughly moralized conception of politics, and a populist is a politician who claims that he or she – and only he or she – truly represents the people, thus relegating all political opponents to the role of iniquitous pretenders. Behind this claim stands the further assumption that the people have one common will that genuinely aims at the common good, and that the people’s authentic leader [...] can identify and implement it. Populists, then, are not only anti-elitist; they are necessarily anti-pluralist and hence anti-liberal. Their politics is always polarizing, splitting the actual citizenry into a pure, moral people and the immoral others – whom Erdoğan has often simply called ‘traitors.’”¹⁰

It is beyond the scope of this analysis to explain the reasons behind the transformation of the AKP from a moderate conservative democratic party to a populist one in the sense described above, with increasingly authoritarian leanings. One possible explanation is the greater self-confidence gained by the AKP’s successive electoral victories, each time with a larger share of votes. Another is the disappearance of the threat of the Turkish military’s intervention into politics, a realistic scenario during the AKP’s first two terms in power. A third explanation, may be the growing sense of mission by the AKP leadership to make Turkey a leading country in the Islamic world through the development of some kind of a populist Muslim democracy.

This analysis suggests that the August 2014 presidential election is important not only for its own sake, but even more so for what it portends for the future of Turkish democracy. Erdoğan made it quite clear in his campaign that, if elected, he would not be a symbolic or ceremonial president (“a flower-pot president,” as he puts it), but an active one who will use his constitutional powers to the maximum. He and other party spokesmen also clearly indicated that if they obtain the necessary constitutional amendment majority in the forthcoming parliamentary elections, they will change the system of government into a semi-presidential or presidential one. Even more ominously, they did not hide their intention of also

also, Kemal Göktaş, “BDP-HDP oylarını 1 milyon artırdı”, in *Milliyet*, 13 August 2014, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/d/t.aspx?ID=1924841>.

10 Jan-Werner Mueller, “Erdoğan and the Paradox of Populism”, in *Project Syndicate*, 11 August 2014, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/print/jan-werner-mueller-examines-the-underpinnings-of-the-new-turkish-president-s-political-staying-power>. Along similar lines, Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Putinism”, in *The Washington Post*, 31 July 2014, <http://wapo.st/1uMzhsl>.

amending the constitution in order to create a more politically dependent and pliant judiciary. This seems to be in line with the logic of the populist regimes as described by Mueller: “[P]opulist parties tend to colonize the state with alacrity. If only one party truly represents the people, why should the state not become the instrument of the people? And when populists have an opportunity to write a new constitution, why should they not ride roughshod over any opposition, which, by definition, must comprise the enemies of the people (who often are accused of being foreign agents)?”¹¹

At the moment the AKP is short of the minimum constitutional amendment majority of three-fifths of parliament. The level of support it received in March and August 2014 elections makes it highly unlikely that it will

obtain such a majority in the forthcoming parliamentary elections, normally scheduled for June 2015, but which can be anticipated by a parliamentary resolution. In the meantime, Erdoğan will make the system function in a semi-presidential fashion not by *de iure* but by *de facto* means, namely by appointing a loyal prime minister and a cabinet. Erdoğan’s choice as prime minister, a decision ostensibly reached after consultations with the party apparatus, was Ahmet Davutoğlu, the former foreign minister and a leading conservative intellectual. Among Erdoğan’s criteria for this decision the most important ones were, no doubt, ideological affinity and loyalty to his person. This means that the year ahead will be a period of extreme polarization, full of uncertainties. If the AKP eventually succeeds in changing the constitution in the direction it desires, Turkey will move one big step closer to competitive authoritarian regimes.

11 Jan-Werner Mueller, “Erdoğan and the Paradox of Populism”, cit.