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Eyeing Elections, Erdoğan Doubles Down on Critics: Will the Strategy Backfire?

by Sinan Ekim

Turkish-German relations hit a new low last month, when Spanish authorities arrested Doğan Akhanlı, a Turkish-born German writer and frequent critic of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in Granada on 19 August. Only a day before, Erdoğan had launched an assault on Germany's three mainstream parties – the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens –, labelling them as “enemies of Turkey”¹ and urging Germany's Turkish community to boycott them in the upcoming federal elections on 24 September.

Both developments escalated tensions between the two countries, with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and her Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel complaining about Turkey's blatant

interference in Germany's domestic affairs. These developments also weighed heavily on the first televised election debate on 3 September, when Merkel and SPD leader Martin Schulz both voiced their readiness to close the door on Turkey's EU accession bid.

The outcome of the German vote is not what really concerns Erdoğan, however. Such statements are rather driven by declining popularity amidst slowing economic growth and mounting social and security challenges in Turkey. In this respect, Erdoğan is gearing up for the next Turkish elections, scheduled for November 2019. Faced with dwindling support and a stronger political opposition, Erdoğan wants to convey to his critics, both at home and abroad, that they will not be safe from his wrath.

What happened to Akhanlı is a case in point. He has now been released from custody, but is not permitted to leave

¹ “Erdoğan tells Turks in Germany Not to Vote for ‘Turkey's Enemies’ Merkel, Schulz, Greens”, in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 18 August 2017, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=238&nID=116905>.

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Spain until a verdict has been reached. Whether or not he is handed over to Turkey for extradition, this episode will set a haunting precedent. Wary of a similar fate, many of Erdoğan's opponents may dial down their rhetoric or be frightened into complete silence.

The same logic drives Erdoğan's assaults on the West and particularly Germany. The German-Turkish community has in the past been sympathetic to such language, and 63.07 percent of 1.4 million Turks in Germany who were eligible to vote in Turkey's constitutional referendum (out of a total of 2.9 million) voted in favour of the proposed reforms.

However, this data should not serve as an index of the voting behavior of the entire community. Only 247,000 German-Turks have dual citizenship and can also vote in the German elections.² Statistically, therefore, the referendum results could be a bellwether for the electoral trend of only two hundred thousand citizens. Furthermore, the 1.25 million German-Turks that are eligible to vote on 24 September constitute only 2 percent of an electorate of 61.5 million – meaning that they will not yield much weight over the final results.

These statistical realities could not have been lost on Erdoğan. Yet, they may well have been, given that his objective

² German Federal Statistical Office, *Bevölkerung mit Migrationshintergrund. Ergebnisse des Mikrozensus 2016. Fachserie 1 Reihe 2.2 - 2016*, 1 August 2017, p. 168, <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Publikationen/Thematisch/Bevoelkerung/MigrationIntegration/Migrationshintergrund.html>.

is not to win over the German-Turkish constituency. Such hyper-nationalistic statements are meant for domestic consumption, and are aimed to rally the president's supporters while neutralizing his critics. Turkey's relentless EU-bashing, and the strong responses delivered by a number of EU member states and institutions, allows Erdoğan to complain about a supposed Western plot to isolate Turkey while simultaneously spotting disloyal elements within his party, the AKP, well ahead of the next electoral appointments.

Erdoğan's worries are not exaggerated as his political base has indeed started to come apart. His failure to achieve a resounding victory in the April referendum is an early indicator of his weakening position: at least 100 AKP lawmakers, as well as between 4 to 12 percent of AKP's electorate, are rumored to have voted against the constitutional changes. Furthermore, 35 percent of AKP voters reportedly supported the "Justice March", led by the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party's (CHP), which suggests that more and more voters are concerned about Erdoğan's growing authoritarianism and the state of the justice system under his rule.³

Erdoğan alluded to the AKP's dwindling support in one of his first speeches after the referendum. Addressing how Turkey's major cities – including Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir and Antalya – had voted "no", he promised to

³ Pinar Tremblay, "Turkey's Pervasive President May Be Wearing out His Welcome", in *Al-Monitor*, 28 July 2017, <http://almon.co/2wbnm>.

reconstruct the party's provincial branches. Yet, the AKP's recent cabinet reshuffle proves that not much has changed: 15 ministers kept their portfolios, six members of Parliament entered the cabinet and five ministers were appointed to new positions.⁴ Instead of heeding more critical voices, the shake-up dispensed with them, installing more Erdoğan loyalists in key positions. Furthermore, the new parliamentary bylaws, re-modified on 27 July, have introduced a series of regulations that will hollow out the Parliament as a venue for political opposition: lawmakers now have much less time to review legislation and with the backing of 20 parliamentarians, the Parliament may also waive voting by secret ballot on bills.

Turkey's economy is also suffering. Problems include a slowing growth-rate, a higher percentage of youth unemployment and low labour force participation. Instead of reversing this trend, Erdoğan has moved forward with policies that have taken a heavier toll on the economy. The government's blacklisting of hundreds of firms under charges of financing terrorism has scared away European investors. Erdoğan's raging against the West has also prompted Berlin to warn its citizens against travelling and investing in Turkey, while also threatening to suspend negotiations on deepening the customs union. These developments will further hamper the country's economic wellbeing, and with it, the electorate that had economically

thrived under the AKP's rule.

Furthermore, there is now an opposition that can capitalize on these vulnerabilities, potentially challenging Erdoğan and the AKP in November 2019. Following the "Justice March", the CHP is rebranding itself into a credible governing force. Meral Akşener, formerly with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), is also expected to start a new party in October, which will likely seek to tap into the AKP's voter-base and capture those center-right votes that had propelled Erdoğan into the limelight in 2002.

Despite all these problems, Erdoğan does not concern himself with fixing what is broken; rather he is occupied with his own political survival. When popular support for the system he has been constructing is wearing thin, his strategy is to double down on his critics. If Erdoğan wins the popular vote in 2019 and continues to do so thereafter, not only will he enjoy substantially expanded powers as president, he will also be able to serve two five-year presidential terms and, by exploiting some loop-holes, could potentially secure a third mandate. This would extend him a political lifeline until 2034, by which time he would have been at the helm for more than three decades.⁵

European leaders have the chance to play a constructive role here. Gabriel stated last month that Germany would collaborate with democratic

⁴ Baris Gundogan, "Turkish Premier Announces Major Cabinet Reshuffle", in *Anadolu Agency*, 19 July 2017, <http://v.aa.com.tr/864932>.

⁵ Sinan Ekim and Kemal Kirişci, "The Turkish Constitutional Referendum, Explained", in *Order from Chaos*, 13 April 2017, <http://brook.gs/2o21N7y>.

elements in Turkey,⁶ and Merkel pledged support to those that voted “no” in April, calling on German-Turks to partake in the elections.⁷ Both are steps in the right direction. As demonstrated by the referendum results, half of Turkey’s population does not approve of Erdoğan’s policies, and they should not be shunned by Europe for his actions. Instead of delivering statements akin to those made by Merkel and Schulz during the election debate – themselves largely delivered for domestic consumption, to tap into the anti-Turkish frustration that has built-up in Germany –, Berlin should maintain its traditional, conciliatory approach, while championing the Turkish opposition as a counterbalance to the AKP.

Only then may Erdoğan realize that his policies are not ostracizing his “enemies” but rather himself.

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⁶ “Germany’s Gabriel Hits Back at Erdogan with Call to Back Turkish Democracy”, in *Reuters*, 22 August 2017, <https://reut.rs/2vUdXGW>.

⁷ “Das TV-Duell - Merkel - Schulz”, in *ZDF*, 3 September 2017, <https://www.zdf.de/politik/wahlen/tv-duell-merkel-schulz-100.html>.

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