

Turkey's Municipal Elections: Setting the Stage for Upcoming Elections

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Those who expected municipal elections to give the country a respite from the draining tensions and polarization that have marked the last three months have been proven wrong. Dead wrong. The long anticipated victory speech by Prime Minister Erdoğan in which much of this hope was vested turned out to be a declaration for the continuation of the war he is waging against the Gülen movement. The movement and its adherents were not the only targets of the Prime Minister's anger and derision though. Turkey is now a country in which the executive branch considers any institution that tries to put a check on its actions illegitimate.

So in the week that followed the elections, the Constitutional Court became the target of an assault on its legitimacy, with the Chief Justice of the Court, Haşim Kılıç, subjected to a relentless campaign of vilification by the government and its allies in the media. The Court's "sin" was to have ruled in favor of terminating the legally questionable ban on Twitter and demanding that the rule of law be respected. Given the in the next fourteen months Turkey will have its first ever presidential election in August 2014 and a general election in June 2015, the Turkish public is gearing up for more tension, anxiety and assault on the media and other institutions.

The Row with the Gülen Movement

After a bitter and rancorous campaign overshadowed by charges of immense corruption against the government; an endless flow of incriminating, legally or illegally obtained audio-tape leaks; a furious battle between the ruling party and its erstwhile allies in the Islamist camp – the Gülen movement –; the further erosion of the rule of law; the virtual elimination of separation of powers; the exposure of the extent of the Prime Minister's meddling in media coverage and commentary; the banning of Twitter and then YouTube (where the leaks could

be disseminated), Turkey's local elections ended with a strong showing and victory for Prime Minister Erdoğan.

What primarily defined the electoral campaign was Mr. Erdoğan's tireless, acrimonious, accusatory battle waged against the Gülen movement. The latter has a vast network of global and national educational institutions and businesses spread globally, and runs numerous media outlets led by a retired preacher, Fethulah Gülen, in self-imposed exile in the US. Until recently, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Gülenists joined forces to clear the Turkish political system of the vestiges of military tutelage.

In nearly thirty years of secretive efforts, the Gülenists deeply infiltrated the judiciary and the police force and were thus instrumental in Mr. Erdogan's success in demilitarizing the Turkish polity. Through their control of the police and the judiciary, they brought charges against the so-called Turkish "deep state", but in their zeal they displayed utter disregard for due process, procedural justice and went so far as to plant evidence and make up crimes to punish suspects and innocents alike. These acts, which were welcomed by the Prime Minister when they served his purposes, were vilified and used to condemn the Gülen movement once the war between the two partners came out into the open. Contrary to initial expectations, the war has escalated to the point of no return.

The Results and the Parties

The local elections were the first round of a long electoral cycle that will continue with the first election by popular vote of the President of the Republic in August. Then, general elections are scheduled for June 2015. There were many allegations, many of them exaggerated, of irregularities in the counting of the votes and a number of results have already been reversed. The suspicious power outage just when ballot counting was progressing in places with tightly contested races (not to mention the amazing explanation by the Energy Minister that

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a cat had entered a major power grid) raised many eyebrows. It has become a matter of grave concern that the body that regulates and oversees elections, the Higher Electoral Council, accepted 70 appeals from the AKP but only 15 from CHP for recounts, including the highly suspect result in the capital city of Ankara.

The Prime Minister chose to fight against tightly argued graft indictments as well as illegally obtained, compromising recordings that implicated him in financial wrongdoing by dismissing prosecutors, removing judges and directly intervening in the judicial process. Thriving in adversity and the intensely polarized atmosphere that he has helped generate, the Prime Minister has managed to keep the loyalty of most of his supporters. His party ended up receiving about 44 percent of the vote.

He presented the charges and the leaks as a conspiracy to unseat him and block Turkey's global ascent, all the while promising to fight corruption once this battle was won. His success, he said, was the only guarantee for different segments of the population to retain the gains of the past eleven years, such as rising incomes, increasing welfare, better access to health and education, religious freedoms, and liberation from military tutelage. For others, it was the only way to preserve their newly acquired status as the new elites of the country. Stability therefore became the key motivation for many of his voters, as well as a desire not to throw their hero to the wolves.

Mr. Erdoğan is a first rate populist politician, a mixture of Silvio Berlusconi, the late Hugo Chavez and, increasingly, Vladimir Putin. That combination has scared many of Mr. Erdoğan's detractors. Some of them were supporters in the early democratizing years of his rule, but grew increasingly disenchanted by the rising authoritarianism and broke ties in the wake of the brutal suppression of last summer's Gezi protests.

In the final tally, the victorious AKP's votes declined by some 2.3 million or 5 to 6 percentage points, with respect to the last general elections, when it received 49.9 percent. Yet the results demonstrated once more that the AKP remains Turkey's only national party. It was either the winner or the main contender in almost all of Turkey's 81 provinces.

The stagnation of the main opposition party, the left-leaning People's Republican Party (CHP) was clearly exposed. The CHP vote remained unchanged from two years ago. The Party is increasingly enclosing itself in a demographic, geographical and sectarian ghetto. It has no discernible vision to convincingly offer to the young, ambitious, upwardly mobile new middle classes. Nor is it capable of reaching out to the working class constituencies in Turkey's main industrial centers, most of which voted decisively for the AKP.

The nationalist MHP came out of these elections with net gains. In fact, the 2 million plus vote that the AKP lost almost exactly matches the number of votes the MHP gained. Although it is still mainly a party confined to the nationalist-conservative provinces of the country, where it challenged the AKP, the MHP galvanizes the support of those who oppose the government's Kurdish opening.



The Kurdish political movement, represented by the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), won three out of four metropolitan municipalities and overall will govern 11 of the 12 provinces in the southeastern region of the country in which the Kurds constitute a majority. As such, the party is now poised to put its project of autonomous rule in practice. Yet, election results also demonstrated that the peace process and the absence of fighting in the region benefited the ruling AKP substantially. The BDP lost some support in two major centers, Diyarbakir and Hakkari, while the vote was very close in other important provinces and indeed the election cancelled in the border city of Ağrı.

The Next Round

Turkey is now gearing up for the presidential elections. The municipal elections revived Mr. Erdoğan's aspiration to become president of the republic. Because his victory speech was anything but conciliatory; more political tension and further toughening of the Prime Minister's political discourse are expected. This suggests that the polarized atmosphere in the country will continue and the witch-hunt against the Gülenists will gain further momentum. In the meantime, individual rights and freedoms are in jeopardy. Although the Constitutional Court lifted the Twitter ban, YouTube is still inaccessible.

The current profile of Mr. Erdoğan and his party is a far cry from what it was at the beginning of AKP rule. At the time, he led the Turkish experiment whereby an Islamist Party fought for democracy, civilianized the polity, and opened up space for individual rights and freedoms. Mr. Erdogan and his colleagues moved the country towards the EU and set a clear record of good economic management along with friendly relations with all.

Recently, even though the Prime Minister recognizes Turkey's lack of a strategic alternative to the Atlantic Alliance, he is moving the country away from the West in spirit. The desire to win his political battles at all costs and his quest to transform Turkey in his own image drives his agenda and underscores his increasingly authoritarian search for power.

At this stage, the EU's own problems and past errors vis-à-vis Turkey make it a less than effective factor in domestic politics. The stage is set for the United States, which has managed to persuade the Prime Minister to recalibrate Ankara's foreign

policy and align it with that of Washington. The near resolution of the Israeli-Turkish discord and the new opening on Cyprus testify to that. Unfortunately, Washington has in the past rarely paid much attention to Turkey's domestic politics or the quality of its democracy. Whether things will be different this time

remains to be seen.

All in all, Turkey's democratization challenge is fully or mainly a Turkish matter that will be met in the next rounds of the electoral cycle.