

GLOBAL TURKEY  IN EUROPE

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July 2014

POLICY BRIEF 17



Stiftung
Mercator



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ISTANBUL POLICY CENTER
SABANCI UNIVERSITY
STIFTUNG MERCATOR INITIATIVE

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Ali Çarkoğlu*

Abstract

The results of Turkey's municipal elections held on 30 March 2014, which consolidated the electoral strength of the conservative Justice and Development Party, surprised many. With presidential elections due to be held in August 2014 and a general election ten months later, this strong electoral performance may be indicative of an effective consolidation of the AKP's electoral predominance. At the same time, these results also pose a puzzle with important implications for the way the presidential election campaign could unfold. This conundrum is due to unrealized expectations and the apparent ineffectiveness of two major developments that many thought would have a considerable impact on the AKP's showing in the local elections: the mass demonstrations against the AKP government as part of the Gezi Park protest movement, and the graft allegations implicating prominent cabinet members. This paper analyses the electoral strategies of Turkey's governing and opposition parties in light of the upcoming presidential and general elections.

The results of Turkey's municipal elections held on 30 March 2014, which consolidated the electoral strength of the conservative Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP), were widely unexpected. The AKP, which has its roots in the Turkish pro-Islamist movement, came out of the elections as the largest party, gaining about 45 percent of the vote and leaving a wide and comfortable margin between itself and its main competitors. These results nevertheless indicate some loss in the share of votes of the AKP compared to the general election in 2011. However, with respect to the 2009 local elections, the AKP's electoral showing actually expanded.

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With presidential elections due to be held this coming August and a general election ten months later, this strong electoral performance may be indicative of an effective consolidation of the AKP's electoral predominance. At the same time, these results also pose a puzzle with important implications for the way the presidential election campaign could unfold. This conundrum is due to unrealized expectations and the apparent ineffectiveness of two major developments that many thought would have a considerable impact on the AKP's showing in the local elections: the mass demonstrations against the AKP government as part of the Gezi Park protest movement, and the graft allegations implicating prominent cabinet members.¹

Millions of protestors all over the country took part in what was commonly named the "Gezi resistance." How is it that these protests did not influence the outcome of the local elections? Perhaps the apparent ineffectiveness of the Gezi Park protests was due to the fact that these protestors were mostly, albeit not exclusively, from the side of liberal and left-leaning social groups with relatively heavy representations of younger generations who favor the opposition. Since these groups have already been on the opposite side of the AKP in the Turkish electoral scene, they do not represent a group of swing voters and hence did not reduce the AKP's level of support. However, the corruption charges came out as a result of a clash within the conservative establishment that backed the AKP government from the beginning of its tenure in 2002. The sources and motivations of these allegations and their merits may not yet be very clear. However, what is clear is that the government perceived these allegations as

1 On Gezi Park events, see the following authors' works, listed in the bibliography: Yeşim Arat (2013), Bethania Assy and Başak Ertür (2014), Seyla Benhabib (2014), Antimo L. Farro and Deniz Günce Demirhisar (2014), Murat Gül et al. (2014), Efe Can Gürçan and Efe Peker (2014), Mehmet Barış Kuymulu (2013), Nikos Moudouros (2014), İlay Romain Örs (2014), Ergun Özbudun (2014), Ömer Taşpınar (2014).

being voiced by the Gülen or Hizmet movement and thus reacted accordingly.² The spiraling graft scandal resulted in a cabinet reshuffle on the eve of 25 December 2013, effectively ousting those ministers accused of corruption. By the end of February 2014, nine AKP MPs had left the party due to corruption allegations and affiliation with the Gülen movement.³

Yet, neither the graft allegations nor the Gezi protests appear to have mobilized a significant group of voters away from the AKP. One factor that should be underlined in this regard is the increasing polarization and rising press-party parallelism in the Turkish media.⁴ Perhaps more than ever before, media coverage of politics in Turkey appears to reflect ideological predispositions and partisan preferences of the ownership and readership of these media outlets. As a result, mostly one-sided, either fully critical or alternatively entirely supportive, perspectives appear in a typical Turkish newspaper or other media outlets. Hence public debate is fractured along deep ideological cleavages and very little, if any, convergence appears as a result of public debate. Sympathizers or opponents of the Gezi Park protests read their own media outlets and are convinced of a strictly one-sided perspective on the nature of these events. Similarly, the graft allegations are either seen as a clear indication of the corrupt nature of the AKP government or as yet another plot against the popularly elected AKP.

Despite such polarized debate on major events, by acting as if nothing of significance has taken place in the country, the AKP government not only survived these crises but was also able to maintain the bulk of its electoral support with only minor losses, and hence appears to have



consolidated its electoral dominance.⁵ In sum, we observe first of all that the AKP maintained a comfortable margin of success across all geographical regions except in the Aegean where the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*-CHP) garnered a larger vote share. Kurdish support behind the Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*-BDP) / People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*-HDP) candidates remained consolidated at around 7 percent but continues to show dominance in the eastern and southeastern Anatolian provinces. As such, the Kurdish vote might be the decisive factor in deciding the outcome of the Presidential elections in August 2014.

The success of the main opposition party, the CHP, appears to critically depend on its candidates with nationalist credentials as well as on the choices of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) whose candidates were relatively weak, thus creating unified support behind the CHP. Given the nature of mayoral races, such an electoral coalition, either explicit or implicit, could work to get a candidate elected. Since mayoral races are based on a first-past-the-post voting system, CHP candidates with nationalist credentials running against weak MHP candidates could attract votes from MHP supporters as well as their own. However, in both Istanbul and Ankara, this strategy of an implicit coalition did not work and the AKP candidates handily won both races. Nevertheless, this electoral coalition appears to have kept the AKP vote share below the 50 percent threshold needed to effectively win in the presidential race. In other words, a cooperative candidate choice among CHP and MHP could potentially complicate the AKP's election plans, and indeed their emerging candidates appear to have attracted some votes from those who have voted for the AKP in earlier elections. However, when carefully

2 The Gülen (Hizmet) or "service" movement was established by a preacher and former imam, Fethullah Gülen who had to leave Turkey in 1999 to avoid prosecution. Gülen currently lives in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania. On the Gülen or Hizmet movement, see: M. Hakan Yavuz, *Toward an Islamic Enlightenment. The Gülen Movement*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013; and David Tittensor, *The House of Service. The Gülen Movement and Islam's Third Way*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.

3 On the December 17 corruption scandal see Taha Özhan, "What happened on Dec 17?", in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 3 January 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=449&nID=60481>; and Joe Parkinson and Emre Peker, "Turkish Police Detain High-Profile Figures in Corruption Probe", in *Wall Street Journal*, 17 December 2013, <http://on.wsj.com/1hYqTz1>. For an early review of the state of anti-corruption policy see Zeyno Baran, "Corruption: the Turkish challenge", in *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Fall 2000), p. 127-146; and Bryane Michael, "Anti-Corruption in the Turkey's EU Accession", in *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Winter 2004), p. 17-28, <http://www.turkishpolicy.com/article/177/the-role-of-anti-corruption-in-the-turkish-accession-to-the-eu-winter-2004/>.

4 See Ali Çarkoğlu and Gözde Yavuz, "Press-Party Parallelism in Turkey: An Individual Level Interpretation", in *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (December 2010) p. 613-624; and Ali Çarkoğlu, Lemi Baruh and Kerem Yıldırım, "Press-Party Parallelism and Polarization of News Media during an Election Campaign. The Case of the 2011 Turkish Elections", in *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (July 2014), p. 295-317.

5 For a detailed analyses of the March 2014 election results, see Ali Çarkoğlu, "One Down, Two More to Go: Electoral Trends in the Aftermath of the March 2014 Municipality Elections", in *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2014), p. 99-109; and Ali Çarkoğlu, "Plus ça change plus c'est la meme chose: Consolidation of the Justice and Development Party's Predominance in Turkish Politics in the aftermath of March 2014 Local Elections", in *South European Society and Politics*, 2014 forthcoming.

analyzed, it becomes clear that the distribution of MHP's regional electoral support has reached a competitive level. In five out of twelve regions, the MHP is now the second party after the AKP. Considering the fact that in Istanbul and Ankara the candidate selection and party campaign strategies of both parties appeared to support a winning solution against the AKP, the third party status of the MHP could be seen as a direct function of the campaign strategy. Hence, the real question after the 30 March elections became whether the rise of MHP at the polls is here to stay. Since the CHP has also slightly increased its vote share compared to earlier elections, the gain of the MHP cannot be solely due to shifts from the CHP but must have also come from the AKP.

This observation on the rising support for the MHP can perhaps validate the emergence of CHP-MHP collaboration in the approaching presidential elections. Given that the electoral support enjoyed by the two opposition parties ranges between 15 to 25 percent each, it appears that an AKP candidate could easily win if the opposition ran separate candidates. Hence, the MHP brought forward the so-called "roof candidate" campaign strategy. This strategy simply refers to a candidate jointly supported by the opposition parties to represent a joining of forces against the AKP under the same roof. The CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, apparently without much consultation with the party establishment, proposed Ekmelettin İhsanoğlu to run as the joint "roof" candidate of both the CHP and the MHP.

İhsanoğlu is an academic with a PhD in chemistry who later turned to the study of the history of science in Islamic societies. His conservative credentials however are rooted in his family origins in Cairo, where he was born. Despite being trained as a chemist, he nevertheless was active in cultural and historical studies from early on in his academic career. In addition to being a lecturer of Turkish Literature and Language at Ain Shams University in Cairo during the late 1960s, he earlier was also a part-time cataloger of printed and manuscript Ottoman books at the Cairo National Library. From the early 1970s onwards, İhsanoğlu embarked in various diplomatic and cultural missions and committees, which in 1980 resulted in the establishment of the Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture, an intergovernmental research center and subsidiary organ of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Istanbul. During the course of his long diplomatic career as the head of this mission, İhsanoğlu was also appointed as "Ambassador at Large" by the first President of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Alija Izetbegović, in 1997 for his services to Bosnia-Herzegovina. He also appears as the Honorary Consul of Gambia in Istanbul since the early 1990s.⁶ However, İhsanoğlu's diplomatic career reached its peak

in 2005 when he was elected as the 9th secretary general of the OIC, a position he held until 31 January 2014.

Despite his academic and diplomatic career, İhsanoğlu remained on the sidelines of politics for most of his life. A memorable example was the conflict he found himself in with Prime Minister Erdoğan in the aftermath of the most recent military coup in Egypt in 2013. Erdoğan's insistence that the OIC should condemn and pursue a more active role against the coup in Egypt was not obtained. This incidence was the first time that İhsanoğlu was pitted against Erdoğan.

The logic of İhsanoğlu's candidacy is rooted in the rising electoral strength of the MHP, as well as on assumptions concerning the appeal of a conservative and credibly pious candidate for the AKP constituency who feels uneasy about Erdoğan's authoritarian approach over the course of the Gezi Park protests and corruption allegations voiced during the past year. These so-called "uneasy AKP voters" may indeed exist among AKP supporters. However, at the peak of corruption allegations and in the aftermath of the Gezi protests, such a group of uneasy voters did not result in a significant group of swing votes. The question then is whether the personality and charisma of Erdoğan represents an even more salient push factor for a latent group of uneasy AKP voters during a presidential campaign compared to local elections where many different candidates run for mayor positions? It is difficult to assess the extent to which Erdoğan's personality will attract or alienate some voters. He personally campaigned to get the AKP candidates elected in the mayoral races in March 2014. However, besides his campaign, these candidates were also active and well known in their provincial constituencies. In the presidential election, moreover, Erdoğan is alone and is calling on voter support for his personal career objectives. Some of the uneasy AKP voters might have voted for the AKP and its candidates in the mayoral elections but may not be as comfortable in supporting Erdoğan after his polarizing performance following the Gezi Park protests and the graft allegations. How the personality and charisma (or lack thereof) of the prime minister will influence the voters' choice of candidates is the great unknown of these upcoming presidential elections.

Almost nothing is has an automatic outcome in electoral politics. Electoral competition and competitors use different opportunities or create and exploit them for their own benefits. Hence, if the personality of Erdoğan is seen as a damaging factor, then the opposition is expected to use this argument in their campaign. So far we have not observed much of a negative campaign against the persona of Erdoğan. A systematic analysis of media coverage during the presidential campaigns is yet not available. However, given the aforementioned polarization and biases of the Turkish media, it is not

⁶ Details on foreign honorary consulates in Turkey available at: http://toursos.com/turkey/foreign-embassy-consulate-in?qt-foreign_embassies_and_consulates=1.

surprising to observe that the personality of Erdoğan is glorified by his supporters in the media camp which dominates the circulation of newspapers in the country. Nor do we observe much of an emphasis on the corruption allegations by the opposition. The only clear campaign signal used by the İhsanoğlu camp concerns his personal piety and statesman qualities. Given the relative inexperience of İhsanoğlu in the political arena, this strategy may appear convenient. However, when his main challenger runs a campaign on his executive success stories and future policy vision, not criticizing him on these grounds and also not targeting his personal stances that polarized the country on many instances may represent a fatal blow to İhsanoğlu's campaign.

A fundamental difference between İhsanoğlu's and Erdoğan's campaign is rooted in the different conceptualizations of the role of coming president. İhsanoğlu's argument is that the president should play a role above politics and try to best represent Turkey in the international arena, and to settle animosities and insecurities among the people. In essence, İhsanoğlu believes that a president should be the head of the nation and the "father of the people". İhsanoğlu argues that the president should leave politics and policy-making to the government and the parliament. As such, his campaign tries to avoid any debate over alternative policies to those pursued by Prime Minister Erdoğan who instead campaigns for a more active executive presidency with many policy initiatives underlining the successes of his tenure in office. While Erdoğan tries to project an active executive presidential image which remains constitutionally challenging to the existing legal framework in the country, İhsanoğlu openly asserts that executive decisions should be left to the government and politics at large should be carried out in the parliament. While everything that Erdoğan talks about is framed as if they are promises to be delivered by his presidency, İhsanoğlu shies away from any deliverables. It will be constitutionally challenging to see how Erdoğan would create such policies as the elected president, but he does not shy away from making promises. İhsanoğlu however, would guide and make his preferences clear but the final decision will be an executive one in which he will not take part. In this respect, he might be sympathetic to Alevi rights or the Kurdish demands but these are matters to be decided by politicians in the parliament. İhsanoğlu will remain as the head of the state and as the father of the nation and perhaps guide the debate, but nothing else concretely will follow beyond that point.

İhsanoğlu's emphasis on the Constitutional status quo of the presidency renders his view of the presidency as a less active and more symbolic position. This view ties his hands in his campaign against Erdoğan. While Erdoğan actively argues for change and presidential activism, İhsanoğlu argues just the opposite, emphasizing that politics

should be left to the parliament. However, whether such a strategy is able to attract the uneasy AKP voters remains to be seen. While messages that could appeal to these potential voters are being issued, would İhsanoğlu be able to also maintain credibility among the core CHP and MHP voters? Here, the assumption of the İhsanoğlu campaign is that these core constituencies have nowhere else to go. However, one danger of such a campaign is that it ignores the core roof coalition constituencies that may stay home and not vote in the presidential election. Differential rates of participation between the AKP and opposition parties may work to the benefit of the Erdoğan campaign.

Besides the roof candidate İhsanoğlu and the AKP candidate Erdoğan, the HDP's candidate is Selahattin Demirtaş. Demirtaş is a Kurdish politician from a younger generation who became a parliamentarian in the 2007 general elections, running as an independent candidate with the support of the Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*-DTP). Later, in January 2010, Demirtaş became the chairman of the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) and led the civil disobedience protests of the BDP during 2011 and 2012. The BDP successfully expanded its parliamentary group under his leadership by including conservative as well as left-leaning candidates together with representatives of non-Kurdish minorities in BDP party lists. In the 2014 local elections, the HDP and BDP adopted a parallel election strategy, with the BDP running in the Kurdish-dominated southeast and the HDP competing in the rest of the country apart from Mersin and Konya, where the BDP also had its own candidates. Following the March 2014 local elections the two parties were re-organized in a joint structure. In this process, the BDP parliamentarians joined the HDP, while the BDP representatives remained in control at the local administration level.

Demirtaş appears to have two main objectives in his candidacy. His first objective is to continue the Kurdish peace process. Secondly, his goal is to expand the left-of-center vote basis for the HDP. By being successful in the second objective, Demirtaş is bound to have more influence over the peace process. Hence Demirtaş aims to appeal to all left-of-center, minority groups that feel left out of the CHP-MHP roof strategy. While a progressive stance for increased liberties and constitutional arrangements to solidify Turkish democracy has an inherent appeal among the extreme and left-of-center segments of the Turkish ideological spectrum, these groups are at best marginal in their size. Since 2007, Kurdish electoral dynamics appear unable to provide much attraction for non-Kurdish leftist groups in the country. Given the fact that center and right-of-center positions are dominant in Turkey, such an outcome may not be surprising.⁷ The success of the

7 See Ali Çarkoğlu and Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, *Turkish Democracy Today. Elections, Protest and Stability in an Islamic Society*, London and New York, I.B. Tauris, 2007; and Ali Çarkoğlu and Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, *The Rising Tide of Conservatism in Turkey*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan,

slowly changing strategy that appears to be continuing under Demirtaş' candidacy remains to be seen.

One other constituency Demirtaş could appeal to are the conservative segments of Kurdish society that have voted for the AKP since its founding years. It would be difficult for a left-leaning candidate such as Demirtaş to mobilize more conservative elements with the Kurdish ethnicity against the AKP candidate. The content of the HDP party program and election manifesto resembles a truly left-of-center party in the western political systems. HDP's positions on labor and women's issues, the environment, sectarian and ethnic minorities have almost nothing in common with the conservative segments of the Kurdish community.⁸ However, it may still be plausible that such groups may be tempted to cast their support for Demirtaş in the first round as a gesture of expressive vote to give support for the Kurdish ethnic agenda in the peace process, and then switch to the AKP candidate in the second round in return for a more forthcoming stance by the government in the future rounds of negotiations with the Kurds that will follow the elections.

In short, Demirtaş' candidacy appears to be aimed at the long run developments of the Kurdish peace process. Perhaps a natural outcome of this strategy is to consolidate left-of-center constituencies under the HDP and pursue an alternative electoral strategy with left-wing policy objectives. Demirtaş' recent declaration of his election manifesto appears to be aimed at a larger electoral constituency closer to the center of the ideological spectrum and on emphasizing democratization reforms. As such, Demirtaş also gives the impression of aiming for a more active presidency. However, embracing progressive electoral bases with an activism on democratization issues leaves aside the bread and butter matters concerning the economy and public policy. Given the limited time left for campaigning and communicating a new left-wing vision for Turkey, Demirtaş appears to be investing in the long-run, looking to the future general election and beyond when a more comprehensive debate on more fundamental economic and social policy issues can be held.

Erdoğan's campaign appears to depend more on the status quo advantages the long AKP tenure has created. However beneficial this status quo may appear, it nevertheless poses an inherent challenge for supporters of change. The state of the Turkish economy appears to attract very little attention in public debates. Such inattention inevitably creates a sense of comfort for the people at large. The unrest in the economy during the first few weeks following the December graft allegations appears to have been controlled and quelled by the AKP

administration. Despite these efforts, the dollar exchange rate was about 1,9 TL/\$ in July 2013 and fluctuates at around 2,1 TL/\$ a year later in 2014. The 12 month inflation rate in terms of the consumer price index was about 6,5 percent in May 2013 (8,3 percent in June 2013) and rose to 9,6 percent (9,16 percent in June 2014) a year later.⁹ While the economy grew by 4,6 percent in 2013, the first quarter growth rate in 2014 remained only at 2,9 percent.¹⁰ The unemployment rate in April 2013 was at 8,8 percent, and increased up to 9,1 a year later.¹¹ All of these main indicators show a weakening economic performance. However, the campaign debate does not revolve around the economy. The opposition continues to ignore the state of the economy in their criticism of the Erdoğan government and hence create an advantageous position for his campaign for an active presidency.

On the foreign policy side, the intense conflict in Syria has pushed about one million refugees into Turkey as of the end of 2013 and this figure is expected to rise by about 30 percent by the end of 2014.¹² Syrian refugees are increasingly observed in not only border urban areas, but also in metropolitan Istanbul, and are thus creating uneasiness among the native residents. However, to what extent this uneasiness will translate into lowered level of support for Erdoğan's candidacy remains to be seen. As long as his main challengers do not voice economic difficulties in their campaign and the economy remains out of the electoral radar screen, it is unlikely that these issues alone will have a negative impact on Erdoğan.

Conclusions

Drastic electoral changes were not observed in 30 March local elections. The ruling AKP lost some support but remained comfortably ahead of the opposition. Contrary to many expectations, the unrest in the aftermath of the Gezi protests in June 2013 or the turbulence caused by the graft allegations against prominent AKP cabinet ministers later in the year did not push significant groups away from the AKP and towards the opposition parties. The moderate rise of the nationalist MHP to an electoral position that is comparable to the main opposition, the CHP, created an environment of collaboration between the two parties for the approaching presidential elections

9 Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK), "Consumer Price Index, May 2014", in *Press Releases*, No. 16130 (3 June 2014), <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=16130>.

10 Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK), "Gross Domestic Product, I. Quarter: January-March, 2014", in *Press Releases*, No. 16192 (10 June 2014), <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=16192>.

11 Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK), "Household Labour Force, April 2014", in *Press Releases*, No. 16009 (15 July 2014), <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=16009>.

12 UNHCR, *2014 UNHCR country operations profile: Turkey*, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e48e0fa7f>.

2009.

8 For HDP party program see <http://www.hdp.org.tr/parti/parti-programi/8>.

which resulted in the “roof candidacy” of Ekmelettin İhsanoğlu.

However, although the opposition enters united into this election, the outcome could primarily depend on the participation rate in the first round. With a lower participation rate, it is likely that different party constituencies will tend to cast their vote at different participation levels. If participation rates were to be the same across all parties, then no one would benefit or suffer because of lower participation rates. However, if one party constituency cast their vote at a higher rate than others, then that party would benefit from a lower overall participation.

The total number of votes obtained by the AKP in March 2014 is about 19,4 million out of 44,8 million total valid votes cast in municipal council elections. It is not clear whether the municipal council or mayoral race results should be used in this speculative calculation. However, it is generally agreed that municipal council results closely resemble partisan preferences in general election results. Perhaps with the exception of Erdoğan, both İhsanoğlu and Demirtaş will have to rely on partisan predispositions and hence these figures are likely to make more sense for our purposes.

The total vote of both the CHP and MHP in the municipal council elections is slightly less than that of the AKP. In a majoritarian first round, both Erdoğan as well as İhsanoğlu will have to take about 22,4 million votes to win, or about 3 million votes from other parties. Assuming that the BDP/HDP will firmly stand behind Demirtaş, Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi-SP*) with its 1,2 million votes appear as the most likely target of appeal for both Erdoğan and İhsanoğlu. Even if the party leadership may decide on the issue of whether to support Erdoğan or İhsanoğlu, it is not clear if SP supporters would follow the leaderships' signals. It is likely that the SP votes will be split between Erdoğan and İhsanoğlu. The rest of the smaller party constituencies are likely to be split between the three candidates, and will therefore not change the balance in favor of a single one.

In other words, unless the participation rate drastically favors one of the candidates, the first round is not highly likely to create a winner. One other unknown is the choice of the Turks living outside of Turkey who will be able to cast their votes for the first time. Their choice might tip the balance in favor of one candidate and even create a winner in the first round. However, the first round is obviously important for two main reasons. One concerns the difference between the two top runners. If the difference is larger than expected, then the second round might favor the larger of the two gathering support from not only the conservative Kurds but also supporters of Demirtaş thinking that Erdoğan is the more likely

candidate to push for a solution to the Kurdish issue. The other reason also concerns the Kurdish voters who side with Demirtaş. If Demirtaş can show that he can appeal to a constituency larger than its core Kurdish voters, then not only he will have a better negotiation advantage for the second round but also for the post-election rounds of Kurdish opening.

The emerging logic of the opposition is to create a single candidate supported by as large a coalition of opposition parties as possible and to force the presidential election into a runoff which is, in the view of the opposition parties, expected to result in a loss for the AKP candidate. However, considering the fact that there appears to be no credible political figures with a solid alternative vision for the country, such a strategy is likely to be too naive. With the president directly elected by popular vote, the Turkish political system risks being turned into an effective presidential system. Although the necessary constitutional arrangements for a presidential system are yet to be passed by the legislature, the rhetoric of the AKP and the argumentation by its leader Prime Minister Erdoğan signals that even without the necessary constitutional arrangements, the intention and actual functioning of the post-presidential election political system will be quite close to a presidential one with concentrated powers in the hands of the popularly elected president. Pretending as the İhsanoğlu campaign appears to do, that no such development is on the agenda is not likely to succeed.

An effective political candidate able to counteract all maneuvers by the AKP candidacy and run an effective political campaign discrediting the AKP positions and establishing its own credibility in the use of executive power and effective delivery of promised policy outcomes might be the only way to win in the presidential race. Yet the focus of the “roof coalition” appears to be on finding a compromise candidate with nationalistic as well as conservative Islamist credentials that will not push away the opposition voters, and that will attract some groups from the AKP constituency. Such preoccupation with strategic balancing acts ignores basic expectations of an alternative vision for the executive office of the country. Moreover, such a strategy effectively leaves the aspirations of the Kurdish constituency unaddressed or at best uncertain. Given the necessity of securing the nationalist MHP constituency behind this compromise candidate, the Kurdish voters are likely to be effectively pushed closer to the AKP candidate who is likely to pursue the incumbent government's line of reform with the framework of Kurdish opening. As such, no matter how problematic the vision, argumentation and delivery of the AKP candidacy, the opposition candidate is not very likely to succeed unless some of the AKP voters quit supporting Erdoğan.

The AKP's continued electoral strength critically depends on favorable perceptions of the economy. Since corruption allegations were nothing new in the minds of the public, the only way these charges could make a dent in the AKP's electoral strength would be if they occurred alongside a decline in economic indicators and forecasts. However, the opposition wrongly chooses to concentrate its efforts on the graft allegations while mostly ignoring the economic difficulties in the country. For success against Erdoğan's candidacy graft allegations cannot be ignored. However, without any significant emphasis on the negative state of the economy this strategy is not likely to succeed.

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