

Analysis

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Summary: Apart from still acting as a party leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is also acting as an executive president, which is in contradiction with Turkey's parliamentary system. Such an unusual political practice is possible only because the prime minister, the real holder of executive power, has agreed to devolve his powers to the president. But Ahmet Davutoğlu does not have too many other options. It is clear that Davutoğlu needs Erdoğan's hand to govern. On the other hand, this de-facto arrangement cannot last forever since even a charismatic leader like Erdoğan cannot continuously act against the constitution. Davutoğlu's performance for the next few months will be crucial for Erdoğan's political fate and his desire for presidentialism.

Erdoğan's Final Countdown to Absolute Power?

by Emre Erdoğan

Considering his exceptionally successful track record as a political strategist, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's victory in the presidential elections in August was hardly surprising to anyone. Less obvious was his successor as prime minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, a professor of international relations and well-known architect of Turkish foreign policy during the AKParty era, first as an advisor, then as the minister of foreign affairs. While his foreign policy preferences were not shared by a significant majority of the public,¹ getting Erdoğan's support sufficed, leading to his appointments first as leader of the AKParty then as prime minister following the presidential election.

In his first speech at the AKParty congress where he was elected chairman, Davutoğlu gave clues of why he was Erdoğan's favorite. He allocated a significant part of this speech to the Gezi Protests and the corruption allegations of December 2013, and framed these events as coup attempts and attacks on Turkey's political and economic stability under the AKParty rule. Davutoğlu also listed the Kurdish Peace Process among the central pillars

of his future policies, showing that he will maintain Erdoğan's political priorities. He also promised to act "hand-in-hand" with the president.

Constitutionally, Turkey is a parliamentary democracy where the executive branch acts as the first among equals — a feature designed to prevent political instability — and the president's powers are largely symbolic. The president's veto power acts as a check mechanism, one that has been frequently used in the past, especially when the president and the parliament had different political agendas.

As he had promised in his presidential campaign, Erdoğan is much more active than previous presidents. He acts like a party leader rather than the president of the republic. Recent polls show that his approval rate is tied to his party base or voters, about 50 percent, and that the remaining 50 percent is strongly opposed to him. This picture was different during the previous administration. While President Abdullah Gül was a partisan candidate elected by the parliament in 2007, his approval rate fluctuated between 70 and 60 percent, showing that he received support from other parties' constituencies. Erdoğan's elec-

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¹ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/iw/originals/2013/02/poll-davutoglu-akp-syria-policy-unpopular-turkey.html#>



Analysis

tion through direct vote has already exposed him to one of the well-known perils of presidential systems: Direct election of a president divides the nation. Apart from still acting as a party leader, Erdoğan is also acting as an executive president, which is in contradiction with Turkey's parliamentary system.

Such an unusual political practice is possible only because the prime minister, the real holder of executive power, has agreed to devolve his powers to the president. But Davutoğlu does not have too many other options, for three reasons. First of all, he was essentially appointed by Erdoğan as the chairman of AKParty and prime minister. Secondly, he got the vote of confidence from members of the parliament who were directly handpicked by Erdoğan before the 2011 general elections. Thirdly, his cabinet was informally designed and legally approved by Erdoğan. Given these circumstances, it is clear that Davutoğlu needs Erdoğan's hand to govern.

On the other hand, this de-facto arrangement cannot last forever since even a charismatic leader like Erdoğan cannot continuously act against the constitution. That is why he has openly declared his desire to establish a presidential system. Moreover, in a highly symbolic move and despite critical comparisons with the palaces of Ceausescu of Romania and Kim Jong-Un of North Korea, Erdoğan decided to use the 1,000-room building that was originally constructed to house the Prime Ministry. This new presidential palace, which Erdoğan calls the People's Palace, is significantly bigger than the Parliament building, indicating the superiority of a president directly elected by the people over the legislative branch. This illustrates another peril of the presidential system: a zero-sum competition between branches of government for the favor of the people.

Transition to the presidential system through a constitutional amendment can be achieved either within the parliament or through a referendum. Three hundred sixty-seven votes in Turkey's 550-seat parliament are needed to change the constitution and 330 votes are needed to initiate a referendum. A simple simulation based on results of the local elections shows that the AKParty cannot gain enough to hold 367 seats in the upcoming June 7 elections but can possibly, if not easily, win 330 seats and initiate a referendum.

Another alternative to a referendum would be trying to cooperate with another party to change the constitution, but the polarizing nature of the last presidential elections has limited the AKParty's ability to cooperate with other political actors. The most likely candidate as a partner in constitutional reform would be the Kurdish Party, but it would also be the most demanding one.

Under these conditions, the forthcoming general elections are crucial for all actors on the Turkish political scene. The AKParty has to keep its previous vote share, which is around 50 percent, to maximize its bargaining power. However, this time the governing party has an important handicap since its major strategist, Erdoğan, can play only one hand in the game. Hence, Davutoğlu's performance for the next few months will be crucial for Erdoğan's political fate and his desire for presidentialism. Recent polls show that Davutoğlu is still profiting from Erdoğan's popularity. According to some polls, Davutoğlu's favorability is very close to Erdoğan's and almost equal to the party's potential vote.²

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Four months to the general elections may be a very short time for causing radical changes in voters' perceptions. It is known that the majority of Turkish voters — like other voters — make their decisions three to four months before the general elections, and massive communication campaigns target only 5 percent of voters at maximum. Hence, if nothing extraordinary happens, Davutoğlu can securely ride the government and the party for four months and accomplish his mission: creating a suitable parliamentary environment for the presidential system.

However, sometimes four months can be long enough for historical changes. Failure of Lehmann Brothers in 2008 just before the U.S. presidential elections, the Falkland Wars

² <http://www.khas.edu.tr/uploads/pdf-doc-vb/news/TSSEA200CAK2015.pdf>



Analysis

in 1982 just before elections in the U.K., and more recently the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in France, which boosted President François Hollande's popularity are examples of these defining moments.³ As the fragility of the political system increases, effects of these moments may be tsunami sized. And Turkey is very open to several risks, from its economy to the international environment.

An econometric analysis shows a strong correlation between GDP growth and the government's popularity. Other things constant, a government in Turkey needs 5 percent growth to sustain its current vote share; the 3.3 percent growth forecast by the IMF for 2015 is not nearly enough.⁴

The Kurdish Process — the generic label for the democratization program and negotiations with legal and illegal actors in the Kurdish independence movement — may be the magical tool. According to a recent poll,⁵ more than 60 percent of voters support this process, although there is no consensus about potential outcomes. The same poll shows that there is clear partisan divide on this issue: The AKParty constituency and supporters of the Kurdish Party are in favor of the process, while the opposition parties' supporters are against it. Ending an enduring and costly conflict and bringing peace to the region are potential factors that would compensate for losses due to economic problems.

However, recent civil unrest in the heavily Kurdish populated southeast of Turkey showed that the government has guaranteed the support of neither the Kurdish voters nor the Kurdish party. Protests against government inaction to protect the city of Kobane from fighters of the so-called Islamic State led to violent civil unrest and the deaths of more than 40 citizens. Erdoğan and Davutoğlu blamed the Kurdish Party for contributing to tension between Turks and Kurds leading to these events. Recovery in relations needs a lot of energy, and mutual confidence has not been yet re-established.

³ According a recent study, the popularity of François Hollande increased by 21 points, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2015/jan/19/hollandes-popularity-rises-21-points-in-one-month-charlie-hebdo>

⁴ Ali T. Akarca, 2011. "Inter-election vote swings for the Turkish ruling party: The impact of economic performance and other factors," *Equilibrium*, Uniwersytet Mikolajja Kopernika, vol. 6, pp 7-25

⁵ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/being-part-of-turkish-nation-most-popular-identity-for-kurds-survey.aspx?PageID=238&NID=71847&NewsCatID=341>

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The Kurdish party's role has become even more significant with their unexpected decision to participate in the general elections. In the past, the Kurdish party preferred to run with independent candidates in order to bypass the 10 percent electoral threshold at the national level. If they can pass the threshold, they can move from being the voice of an ethnic minority to representing "suppressed" segments of society. At the same time, such an outcome would cost the governing party more than 30 seats. If the Kurdish party fails to pass the 10 percent threshold, on the other hand, the governing party would gain around 40 extra seats.

The Turkish political system is also highly exposed to developments in Turkey's neighborhood, particularly the conflict in Syria. The enduring civil war in Syria has created a flood of immigrants to Turkey. According to the official statistics, more than 1.6 million Syrians are living in Turkey, and only half of them are hosted in camps.⁶ The increased visibility of immigrants has led to public discontent and created a suitable political environment for the ultra-rightist political movement, which can easily compete with the AKParty for voters.

Finally, despite Erdoğan's success in framing the corruption allegations as "internationally driven domestic conspiracies," it seems that these allegations are convincing for a significant part of the populace. According to a recent survey conducted by the Turkish Business and Industry Association (TUSIAD), one-third of businessmen believe that corruption is a common practice in Turkey, and 46

⁶ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224>



Analysis

percent expect a further increase in corruption.⁷ Another survey about corruption perceptions by Transparency International showed that Turkey is among the most corrupt countries, according to its citizens.⁸ Several academic works show that citizens tend to ignore the corruption of politicians if they are also competent. However, if the public has questions about the ability of the leader, it will undoubtedly punish that person at the first opportunity.

Davutoğlu has to maintain his image as a competent leader, even during the discussed political fragilities and Erdoğan's lofty expectations about his presidential powers. The absence of a center right party that could appeal to AKParty's voters may make Davutoğlu's job somewhat easier. However any important mistake or misfortune may still lead to a gigantic failure and withdrawal of the popular credit given by voters. If his failure leads to a significant decline in public confidence in the government, Erdoğan's intervention in everyday politics will increase toward the general elections. Not surprisingly, such involvement would lead to further polarization and increased political tension, creating an intolerable burden on the Turkish economy and society.

⁷ http://www.tusiad.org/_rsc/shared/file/Yolsuzluk-Corruption-PP2013presentation-v4.pptx

⁸ <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2014>

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About the Author

Emre Erdoğan, Ph.D., is an expert in public opinion and foreign policy. He is one of the founders of Infakto RW, an Istanbul-based independent research institute, and a professor of political methodology in Istanbul Bilgi University and Boğaziçi University. Erdoğan is author of several articles about public opinion, foreign policy, political participation, and social capital. *They Know Us Wrongly*, about perceptions of Europeans regarding Turks and Turkey, was published in 2012.

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