

## Analysis

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**Summary:** It appears that the political and social tensions are unlikely to subside soon following Turkey's March 30 local elections. While all major contenders claim to have improved their electoral performance in comparison to previous local elections, the main beneficiary is the AKP. Erdoğan feels that his policies have been vindicated and he enjoys the support of a solid majority of voters. His strong showing has stimulated speculation that he is reconsidering the presidency. Certain problems need to be ironed out in the process of moving the elections ahead. And it seems the strategy of polarizing the electorate was more than electoral, one Erdoğan plans to use to achieve full political control of all governmental institutions.

## Turkey's Elections and the Politics of Uncertainty

by Ilter Turan

### A Different Kind of Election

In democracies, change comes through elections. Voters render judgments about those they have previously elected, the policies they have pursued, and, quite independent of these, whether they are happy with the way things are going. After the elections, outcomes are judged in terms of who won and who lost. Electoral competition tends to promote conflict, but rivals usually make conciliatory remarks once it is completed. A week or two later, life is back to "business as usual." Turkey's local elections of March 30, however, deviate from this pattern. All sides claim they have done well. Reconciliation among parties does not seem to be on the agenda. It appears that the political and social tensions are unlikely to subside soon.

### And the Winner is...?

Going into the elections, all parties had their calculations. The major opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), by charging the prime minister and members of his cabinet with corruption, had hoped to push the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) share of the vote to below 2009 levels, showing that the alleged corruption and the growing authori-

tarianism of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did not find favor with the voters. The AKP, wanted to maintain its momentum and carry it to the presidential elections in August and the parliamentary elections of July 2015. The Nationalist Action Party (MHP), while sharing the objections of the CHP to Erdoğan's policies, wanted to show that they continued to be a power to contend with. The Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), representing Kurdish ethnic aspirations, on the other hand, worked to win the mayors in all the towns in Turkey's southeast, hoping to be in even a stronger position to influence the government in the "peace process," which was put on hold on account of elections.

While all major contenders claim to have improved their electoral performance in comparison to previous local elections, the main beneficiary is the AKP, whose share of the vote — 43.5 percent — is well above its 38.5 percent in the previous local elections. Since all parties treated the March local elections as if they were national, however, AKP's vote appears to have dropped from its high of 49.7 percent in the 2011 national elections. Yet this figure is high enough to give the AKP a majority were these national elec-



## Analysis

tions. Erdoğan feels that his policies have been vindicated and that he can now plan for the future with the confidence of knowing that he continues to enjoy the support of a solid majority of voters.

### Planning the Future

The local elections were the first of three elections within 18 months. What would happen in the remaining two, first the presidential and then parliamentary, depended on the outcome of this local election. A critical question was who would be AKP's presidential candidate. It was known that Erdoğan wanted the office. To interject real political power into the symbolic position, he wanted to transform the system from parliamentary into presidential. However, he failed to persuade the other parties, and his party did not have the necessary votes for constitutional change. He lost interest in the presidency. It was assumed that he would continue as prime minister. Consequently, talk about amending the party statute that states that an AKP deputy may not hold a seat for more than three consecutive terms returned; the more than 70 incumbents who could no longer become candidates under this statute would be delighted if this statute were changed. Regardless, Erdoğan's strong showing has stimulated speculation that he is reconsidering the presidency.

When the presidency became vacant on earlier occasions, Prime Ministers Turgut Özal and Süleyman Demirel had to choose between the prestige of the president and the power of the prime minister, both opting for the former. Özal tried to create an informal presidential system by appointing an obedient prime minister and trying to run the government through undersecretaries of the ministries but failed. It seems that Erdoğan is living through the same ambivalence, but under conditions that differ from the previous occasions. First, in contrast to earlier occasions, the president will be elected not by the parliament but by popular elections. This will furnish the winner with a popular mandate, enhancing his claim to political power. Second, however, the incumbent president, Abdullah Gül, is also eligible to run for a second term.

A decision is needed. It is thought that Gül would accept not insisting on his candidacy if he is offered the post of prime minister. It is also speculated, however, that Erdoğan

would rather have someone whom he could command. Gül, in a press interview, said that the time for a decision had come and that they would consult each other, indicating diplomatically that the decision does not lie with the prime minister alone. Given the electoral calendar, a decision should come by the end of May. The first round of the presidential election is already scheduled for August 10 and a second round (if needed) two weeks later. The constitution says that the presidential electoral process will start and be concluded within the 60 days before the expiration of the term of the incumbent.

Given current voter preferences, it is assumed that the AKP will not experience difficulty in having its candidate elected president. Yet there are impediments on the way. The opposition parties have made allusions to producing a mutually acceptable candidate that would challenge the AKP candidate. That may be unlikely, but somewhat more likely is the contingency that no candidate will achieve the majority in the first round of August 10, postponing the determination of who wins to the run-off on August 24, a possibility that the AKP would find unpleasant.

### Early Elections

As the local elections have concluded, discussion of future elections has commenced. There seems to be a feeling in the business community, the press, and among the general public that having two elections within less than a year of each other is problematic. The government will be occupied with elections neglecting tending to major problems; there would be pressures on the national budget because of election generosities; and the high level of tension that has characterized the elections would continue. While Erdoğan has denied the possibility, he is known to change his mind when conditions warrant it. It would be a surprise if the idea of early elections is not soon taken up.

Certain problems need to be ironed out in the process of moving the elections ahead. One of them is the statute of the AKP that does not allow deputies to run a fourth consecutive time. Since the prime minister has signaled that the party convention is entitled to change it (though he does not presumably favor it), it is likely to be changed. It is, in fact, a necessity if Erdoğan chooses to continue as prime minister. A second problem arises if Gül agrees to become



## Analysis

the prime minister regarding how he will run for office when he is an incumbent. However, where there is a will, there is a way.

### Polarized Asymmetry

In what has become a tradition, Erdoğan stood in the balcony of AKP headquarters on election night and addressed the crowds who had come there to celebrate “victory.” In contrast to earlier occasions, neither his voice nor his rhetoric was conciliatory. Repeating the themes that dominated the campaign, he charged that there was an international conspiracy to unseat him and that its representatives (he singled out supporters of Fethullah Gülen, a religious leader), which had organized into a “parallel state,” would be cleaned out of government. He also raised specter that if his party were to lose, bureaucracy-dominated governments that look down on the average person would return.

This speech and his demeanor afterwards suggest that the strategy of polarizing the electorate was more than electoral, one Erdoğan plans to use to achieve full political control of all governmental institutions, reducing the effectiveness of checks and balances that are found in any democratic system. Furthermore, this is rapidly developing into an erosion of trust in all public institutions, the courts not excepted. The trust in the running of elections has not escaped this erosion as indicated by the explosion in the petitions for recounts of votes. It will not prove easy to restore people’s trust in government.

The opposition parties do not constitute enough of a force to check the expansion of the power of the elected at the expense of public administration, courts, and the rule of law. The elections showed once again that the CHP has evolved into a regional party, fully absent in the east and southeast, sparsely present in the Eastern Black Sea and Central Anatolia (except Ankara), but a force in the Mediterranean, Aegean, Marmara, and Western Black Sea coast line. The MHP is confined mainly to Central Anatolia with some presence in areas where there are major pockets of Turkmen population. The Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), on the other hand, is confined to Turkey’s southeast and some parts of the east. A nationally active AKP together with a geographically, ethnically, ideologically fragmented opposition where the lack of effective

opposition is leading to authoritarian pathologies is not yet a recipe for a healthy democracy. Nonetheless, an emerging rival national party is not in the horizon.

Turkey may be entering a prolonged period of politics of uncertainty.

### About the Author

İlter Turan is an emeritus professor of political science at Istanbul’s Bilgi University, where he also served as president between 1998-2001. His previous employment included professorships at Koç University (1993-1998) and Istanbul University (1964-1993), where he also served as the chair of the International Relations Department (1987-1993), and the director of the Center for the Study of the Balkans and the Middle East (1985-1993). Dr. Turan is the past president of the Turkish Political Science Association and has been a member of the Executive Committee and a vice president of the International Political Science Association (2000-2006). He is a frequent commentator on Turkish politics on TV and newspapers.

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