

Analysis

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Summary: Turkey's upcoming elections promise to be critical on several counts, among which three stand out. First is the Kurdish problem. Second are the corruption charges leveled against the government. Third is what elections mean when the president, elected for the first time by popular vote, is trying to transform that position into a policymaker rather than a figurehead. These three issues may be critically important in determining the election outcome.

Six Months Away Yet So Near: The Forthcoming Elections in Turkey

by *Ilter Turan*

Introduction

U.S. elections are long, drawn-out events. The presidential electoral process, for example, lasts almost two years. Members of the House of Representatives, elected for only two years, probably never enjoy a moment free from reelection considerations. The Turkish electoral system is a remarkable contrast. According to the law, the presidential election is to be completed within 60 days, parliamentary elections within 90. The military leaders who wrote both the 1982 Constitution and the electoral laws had judged that elections were disruptive affairs that undermined domestic peace and should therefore be confined to as brief an interval as possible. The nature of competitive politics, however, forces political actors to always remember that in a democracy, rulers are determined by elections, and so they should behave accordingly.

Unless moved forward, Turkey's national elections will be held sometime in June, probably on June 7. These elections promise to be critical on several counts, among which three stand out. First is the Kurdish problem. Second are the corruption charges leveled against the government. Third is what elections mean when the president, elected for

the first time by popular vote, is trying to transform that position into a policymaker rather than a figurehead. There are certainly also the perennial issues of economy, foreign policy, and others, but these three are unique and may be critically important in influencing electoral outcomes.

Trying to Solve the Kurdish Problem

The Justice and Development Party (AKParty) government under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and now under the stewardship of Ahmet Davutoğlu has said the solution of the country's so-called Kurdish problem is their top domestic priority. Progress has, however, been slow. Communications between the government, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, other affiliates of the PKK, including a large irregular fighting force on Qandil Mountain in Northern Iraq, and its network in Europe, take an inordinate amount of time. Recently, Öcalan has volunteered that negotiations are to start soon, but indications that this is, in fact, the case may still be wanting.

The government, rather than trying to build a broadly based coalition,



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has chosen to pursue the Kurdish “solution” as its exclusive project. This may be good for expediency on a question on which it is difficult to achieve consensus. Furthermore, during the elections, it may be attractive to claim credit for solving a problem that earlier governments had consistently failed to solve. Yet, successful implementation will depend to a considerable degree on whether the solution is found to be acceptable by large segments of the population. This includes the major opposition parties (in particular the major opposition Republican People’s Party, which is open to a negotiated solution, rather than the Nationalist Movement Party), other Kurdish parties such as the religiously oriented Hûda-Par (whose supporters recently clashed with supporters of the PKK in Batman, resulting in four deaths), the majority of citizens of Kurdish ethnic origin who have been at peace with the existing constitutional system, and even the AKParty voters and deputies who have been kept in the dark about what is happening.

There are so many questions that may influence the results of the elections. Will an agreement will be reached? What will it be? Will parts of the PKK other than its imprisoned leader Öcalan and the BDP-HDP that represents the movement in the Turkish parliament accept it? How will other constituencies that have been listed respond to it? The fact that the government has not brought the opposition into the process enhances the likelihood that polarized rather than consensual and conciliatory approaches will prevail; the government is already accusing the opposition of sabotaging the process. What is known so far is that the Öcalan has said that the “peace process” would be suspended if an agreement is not reached before the elections. He has said that in earlier elections, the AKParty has used the process and the ensuing tranquility as an asset without moving toward a solution, which is a strategy that he will no longer tolerate.

The government will do its utmost to bring about a “solution,” and present it to the electorate as another of its achievements in an area where previous governments had consistently failed. Whether the voters will agree is also matter of conjecture.

Corruption and Governmental Largesse

In December 2013, the public prosecutor’s office and the police conducted a set of pre-dawn raids and collected

evidence implicating a number of public officials, four cabinet ministers, some businessmen, and the son of then Prime Minister Erdoğan in a scandal of graft, bribery, extortion, and embezzlement. After persistent efforts from the opposition, the four ministers resigned. Others were taken into custody but were eventually released due to improperly obtained evidence. More recently, the AKParty majority of a parliamentary investigation committee voted not to recommend repealing the immunity of the former ministers and to send them to trial. On January 20, a majority in parliament, including more than two dozen defections from the governing party, concurred with the recommendation of the committee.

The government has diagnosed the events as part of a broader conspiracy organized by the Gülenist movement, a religious group that was formerly a part of the AKParty voter coalition. By linking the corruption charges to a broad conspiracy, the president has tried to defuse them, but the opposition has kept them alive. The public’s impression is that the ministers have failed to account for the wealth they have acquired while in office. Some AKParty deputies have also indicated that unless the ministers are sent to court, charges of corruption will continue to haunt them.

The potential negative effects of corruption charges may be confounded by the completion of a very expensive set of ornate buildings that were begun as the offices of the prime ministry but were converted into a presidential palace after Erdoğan was elected president. The criticisms leveled against the costly structure, with 1,150 rooms, has put the president on the defensive. He has argued that the palace belongs to the nation, as is becoming of a globally important country. Whether charges of corruption and extravagant palaces will undermine AKParty’s electoral support negatively or whether the AKParty voters will choose to ignore it is another matter of conjecture.

Who Really Runs the Country?

The Turkish constitutional system is undergoing transformation by *fait accomplis*. Erdoğan, whose proclivity to interpret democracy as majoritarianism had been established earlier, has said that he is going to be an active president. Accordingly, rather than being the figurehead without partisan affiliation who stands equidistant from all political



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parties that the previous presidents have been, he has chosen to act as the chief policymaker. His party, including the prime minister, has so far not chosen to challenge him. This is understandable: it is the charismatic personality of the president that has led his party to electoral victory. His charismatic appeal enables him to continue to wield strong influence in the AKParty. Everyone feels that he will be able to designate all the candidates for parliament, leading those aspiring for office to ingratiate themselves with him.

Can the president assure his party of another major victory? There are a number of factors whose influence on election results is difficult to predict. The first is the role the president has chosen for himself, a role that runs counter to Turkish political tradition and practice. Will the voters readily accept this? The question becomes more important in view of the president's growing authoritarianism as well as the manifestations of grandeur to which the president appears to have availed himself during the recent months. A second and related factor is whether the president and the prime minister will be able to maintain a peaceful relationship, since it is the latter who is accountable for policies initiated by the former. While strong evidence of a rift between them is lacking, there has not been sufficient time to test the relationship. Third, will those who can no longer become candidates for deputy (party statute does not allow for deputies to serve more than three consecutive terms) accept their fate or challenge Erdoğan, who has "escaped" the three-term rule by becoming the president? In the past, such conditions have led to fragmentation of parties.

At the moment, it may be safely predicted that even if the AKParty wins a majority, it will not be one big enough to change the constitution and introduce Turkey to a presidential system. Whether the insistence of the president on being a policymaker and his increasing authoritarianism will find favor with the electorate is a final matter of conjecture.

And Other Factors

The outcome of any election is determined by the interplay of a variety of factors. Yet, there are factors unique to the upcoming parliamentary elections in Turkey that may play as important a role in determining the results as the more standard economic and foreign policy considerations. Turkey's elections are six months away, there are three

months before the campaign commences. Yet the days seem so short. Informally, the campaign has already started for an election that promises to be critical for Turkey's political future.

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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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