

RESEARCH NOTES

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Turkey's Presidential Prospects ASSESSING RECENT TRENDS

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Turkey's incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP) won the country's March 30 local elections. In the run-up to the local elections, parties ran nationwide campaigns, rallying voters not just behind mayoral and local council candidates but also their national leaders and platforms, deliberately as a "signal" for national popularity. While a more-conventional analytical approach compares the parties' performance in this election to their support in the 2009 local elections, an unorthodox analytical approach compares this year's turnout with the most recent 2011 general election results, when parties contested for government.

Whichever angle one chooses, however, a new four-party system has emerged in Turkey, comprising the ruling AKP—a coalition of center-right and pro-business groups, Islamists, reformed Islamists, and conservatives—and the three opposition parties: the secular-leftist Republican People's Party (CHP), the right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP), and the Kurdish nationalist Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). Turkey's old and established parties, the True Path Party (DYP) of Suleyman Demirel, the Motherland Party (ANAP) of Turgut Ozal, and the Democratic Left Party (DSP) of Bulent Ecevit, have all but vanished from the political scene with these elections.

In this new system, the AKP remains dominant, holding especially strong appeal in rural Turkey, including central and eastern Anatolia, and among the urban working and lower-middle class constituents

who carried it to power. The CHP, most prominent among the opposition parties, seems to be building appeal among urban voters, especially those clustered in wealthy Turkish provinces around Istanbul. The traditionally rightist MHP has gained with some disenchanted AKP supporters, along with centrist and center-right voters, especially in the country's middle-income provinces. The BDP, smallest of the four opposition parties and appealing to the Kurdish vote, has less than 7 percent support, but the Kurdish nationalist vote could nonetheless be influential in deciding the August presidential outcome by tipping it toward either the AKP or its opponents. Most BDP support is concentrated in southeastern Turkey.

Reading the Election Results

The conventional and unconventional analyses of the March AKP victory play out as follows.

Conventional analysis. All four major parties in Turkey's political landscape saw gains in the latest vote when compared to results of the last local elections¹—the AKP from 39 to 43 percent, the CHP from 23 to 26 percent, the MHP from 16 to 18 percent, and the BDP from 5.68 to 6.6 percent. Likewise, following a decade-long trend, the formerly prominent DYP, ANAP, and DSP—which alternated between 1982 and 2002 to run the country—effectively went extinct.

Unconventional analysis. Given that local elections do not affect representation in the national govern-

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ment, analysts have typically refrained from comparing parties' local performance to general and parliamentary election results. However, such a method may be called for this time. In the run-up to the March 30 vote, party leaders ran nationwide campaigns, even though Turks were only voting technically for mayors and council members. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan toured the entire country, rallying on behalf of AKP candidates—and, more important, under the banner of his image as the country's future leader—while the opposition ran anti-Erdogan campaigns, using corruption allegations against the prime minister as fodder. Hence, the election results can be seen as a vote of confidence for Erdogan and his ruling party.

In comparing the recent local election results with the 2011 parliamentary results, one sees a different picture from that provided in the above conventional analysis. To begin with, AKP support dropped from 50 to 43 percent, while CHP support remained nearly steady at about 26 percent. Meanwhile, BDP support stagnated at 6.6 percent, suggesting the party's creation of the People's Democracy Party (HDP), a movement aimed at appealing to left-leaning Turks and Kurds in major cities in Western Turkey, had not yielded the desired outcome.

The MHP made the most striking gains, from 13 to 18 percent. Some of the extra votes may have come at the expense of the AKP, which was tarnished by a high-profile corruption scandal in late 2013 that resulted in the resignation of several key AKP ministers. This move by voters from one right-wing party to another suggests the traditional left-right split in Turkish politics is alive. The "leftist" CHP cannot make significant gains from disillusioned "right wing" AKP voters. And even though the CHP and MHP leaderships made unofficial election alliances in certain provinces, such as Ankara, at least some CHP or MHP voters did not cross the left-right divide; the AKP won Ankara by a slight margin. Accordingly, an MHP-CHP effort to field a joint candidate in the August presidential polls would face challenges uniting voters and thus blocking an AKP triumph.

Shifts and new trends in voter behavior. Whether using the conventional analysis to conclude that all par-

ties increased their votes or the unconventional analysis to suggest that the AKP lost some votes and the MHP gained some, a closer study of the latest election results points to new trends along the four-party axis.

MHP

Gains in middle Turkey. In particular, the MHP gained in the western-central Black Sea coastal and Inner Aegean/Lakes regions. These regions, with mixed industrial-agricultural economies, can be considered "middle Turkey," falling as they do between the prosperous Mediterranean, Marmara, and Aegean seacoasts and the poorer areas of central, eastern, and southeastern Anatolia. The MHP took between a fourth and a third of the votes in these regions, comfortably exceeding its national average of 18 percent. For instance, in the western-central Black Sea coastal provinces, again using the 2011 general elections for comparison, the MHP increased its votes by 153 percent in Samsun, 122 percent in Sinop, 80 percent in Zonguldak, and 77 percent in Bartin. The party also made major headway in the Inner Aegean/Lakes region provinces, including by 110 percent in Manisa, 90 percent in Kutahya, 78 percent in Isparta, 67 percent in Usak, and 65 percent in Afyon.

In the past, the DSP and to a lesser extent the ANAP dominated the western Black Sea coastal provinces. The DSP's hold on the area was so strong that it was dubbed "Ecevit-land" after the former prime minister whose name has also been identified with the Turkish left. The DYP once enjoyed similar supremacy in the Inner Aegean/Lakes region, which was known as "Demirel-land" after another former premier, and president, whose name has stood for Turkey's center-right. In both Ecevit-land and Demirel-land, the MHP has emerged as the rising party, as well as the main beneficiary of the implosion of the country's centrist and center-right parties.

Makes potential gains from AKP tensions with the Gulen movement. The split between the AKP and the Gulen movement, a conservative social network that broke ranks with Erdogan prior to the March 30 polls, does not seem to have caused large electoral swings. Nevertheless, in isolated cases, the peeling



away of Gulen-affiliated voters from the AKP may have aided the MHP. In Erzurum, for instance, the MHP received 85 percent more votes (a total of 25 percent, up from 13 percent in 2011), likely benefiting from the AKP-Gulenist rift. (The movement’s founder, Fethullah Gulen, was born in Erzurum, where the Gulenists are considered to have a relatively strong following.) Conversely, the AKP saw its support decline from 70 to 54 percent in Erzurum.

Gains in conservative central and eastern Anatolia. The MHP also gained substantially in conservative-nationalist central and eastern Anatolian provinces where it has traditionally been strong, likely stealing disaffected conservative voters from the AKP. Take, for instance, the central Anatolian provinces of Yozgat, Konya, and Aksaray, where the MHP increased its votes by 73, 67, and 71 percent, respectively, and where the AKP lost 21, 14, and 19 percent of its support. A similar shift can be observed in east-

ern Anatolian provinces such as Erzincan and Adiyaman, where local MHP support increased by 126 and 75 percent, respectively, and where, in both provinces, the AKP lost 19 percent of its backing.

AKP

Weakens in middle Turkey. MHP gains in middle Turkey have meant corresponding AKP losses. For instance, support for the AKP dropped by 21 percent in Manisa, 20 percent in Isparta, 19 percent in Afyon, 17 percent in Kutahya, and 16 percent in Burdur.

Remains strong in central and eastern Turkey and with the urban working classes. The AKP has maintained its support in urban working- and lower-middle-class districts, such as those in Istanbul and Ankara. Namely, in Istanbul, the AKP received 61 percent of the vote in the Sultanbeyli and Esenler districts, 56 percent of the vote in Bagcilar, and 52 percent in Arnavutkoy. Similarly, in Ankara’s Kecio-

ren district, the AKP garnered a highly respectable 46 percent of the vote.

In the broader picture, the AKP received more than 50 percent support in fourteen of the twenty-two central Anatolian provinces,² suggesting an AKP bastion. Average support for the AKP in central Turkey reaches 52 percent, well above the party's national average of 43 percent.

CHP

Gains in “mega-Istanbul.” The CHP gained most significantly in the country's wealthy industrial northwest, signaling that the party's future lies in its urban appeal. In Bolu, Eskisehir, and Kocaeli, three of Turkey's most developed and wealthy provinces, the CHP increased its votes by 19, 15, and 15, respectively. In Istanbul, the party gained by 18 percent, while in the nearby Marmara Sea provinces of Yalova and Bursa, party support increased by nearly 9 and 8 percent, respectively. All these provinces constitute what we might call “mega-Istanbul,” within Istanbul's sphere of economic influence.

Gains from a right-leaning candidate. In Istanbul's middle-class, traditionally right-leaning Uskudar district, the CHP almost won the mayoral race for the first time in decades, polling 40.5 percent to the AKP's 44.2 percent—with the AKP figure reflecting an 11.5 percent drop from the 2011 election results. The CHP's strong showing, meanwhile, can be linked to its running a conservative candidate, Ihsan Ozkes, a former mufti in Istanbul's Uskudar as well as Beyoglu and Sile districts. The CHP's success here shows it may be able to expand beyond its leftist constituency by running conservative candidates in middle-class urban districts. The AKP-Gulenist split may have also contributed to the CHP's rise in Uskudar, where the Gulen movement is known to have supporters.

Gains from Syria factor? Other than mega-Istanbul, the CHP gained meaningfully in only a handful of provinces, such as industrial Gaziantep, where the party received 6.3 percent more votes than in 2011. The CHP may have been buoyed in Gaziantep not only by the area's urban character but also by its proximity

to the Syrian border and related disenchantment with the fallout of the AKP's Syria policy, namely, inflows of Syrian refugees that have created economic, security, and cultural stresses in border areas.

Slips somewhat in coastal regions. Despite remaining generally strong in its Aegean and Mediterranean coastline bastions and Thrace, the party's support in these regions declined in the March 30 vote. In the Thracian provinces of Edirne and Kırklareli, for instance, the party's votes dropped by 17 and 16 percent, respectively. Along the same lines, in the Aegean province of Aydin, the CHP won the elections but its support fell by 6.4 percent.

Stagnates elsewhere. Beyond mega-Istanbul, the CHP has mainly stagnated, gaining by more than 5 percent in only eleven of Turkey's eighty-one total provinces, while losing support by more than 10 percent in fifty-one provinces.

BDP

Solidifies support in the far southeast. The BDP, though a smaller player than the other three parties, has solidified its base, winning the popular vote in ten southeast Anatolian provinces. The party's greatest strength is in the far southeast, namely ten Kurdish-majority provinces (Sirnak, Siirt, Batman, Hakkari, Diyarbakir, Mardin, Van, Bitlis, Mus, and Agri) that lie between Diyarbakir and the Iranian border in the east, and toward the Iraqi border in the south. This region is known for its strong Kurdish nationalist sentiment and support for the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

The BDP is the only party to capture any province by an overwhelming majority, winning Hakkari, for instance, with 69 percent support, the highest proportion received by any party in a given province.

Fails to win among Kurds in western Turkey. The BDP's creation of a sister party, the HDP, did not result in headway among metropolitan Kurds. While the BDP ran in predominantly Kurdish provinces in the southeast, the HDP ran on behalf of the BDP in the rest of the country, including the big cities in western Turkey. The HDP garnered an average of just 3.3

percent of the vote in the country's three largest cities, Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, which host millions of Kurdish voters. This suggests that Kurds in metropolitan and western Turkey tend to vote like their Turkish neighbors, based on issues such as good governance, economics, and lifestyle, as compared with southeastern Kurds, who now vote overwhelmingly for Kurdish nationalist parties. The HDP ran many ethnic Turkish names on its lists in western Turkey, a move that seems to have hindered the party's growth: nationalist Kurds apparently shied away from voting for a Turkish name even when part of a Kurdish nationalist platform. This development suggests a strengthening of Kurdish nationalist sentiments in the country.

Macrotrends

Single-party dominance. Turkey, a large country with 76 million politically diverse inhabitants, rarely experiences one-party dominance at the provincial level. With the exception of the BDP in Hakkari, in March 2014, no party received more than two thirds of the vote in any province.

That said, a party might dominate the smaller administrative units known as districts, of which there are 957 throughout Turkey. Examples of single-party dominance in the March 30 vote include the CHP's winning 69 percent in the Karsiyaka district (Izmir province). This victory reflected the party's regional strength along the Aegean coast and in Thrace, as well as in the Alevi heartland in north-central Turkey. And the BDP's regional strength is even more pronounced at the district level. The party took 85 percent in the Yuksekova district (Hakkari province) and 89 percent in the Lice district (Diyarbakir province). Based on the two-thirds threshold, the MHP did not dominate in any districts.

Meanwhile, the AKP's dominance at the district level was widespread. Only in Thrace and along the Aegean coast did the party fail to win two thirds of the vote on a district level.

Nationwide AKP vs. regional opposition parties. In the March 30 election, the AKP alone received significant votes (more than 10 percent) in all eighty-one Turkish provinces. By contrast, the CHP received less

than 5 percent in fifteen provinces, the MHP in thirteen provinces, and the BDP in fifty-eight provinces. A split thus emerges between the national AKP—which can stake a claim across all Turkish electoral fault lines, including secular-conservative, liberal-authoritarian, Turkish nationalist–Kurdish nationalist, Alevi-Sunni, and left-right—and the regional CHP, MHP, and BDP, which lack broad nationwide appeal.

Microtrends

Emergence of Kurdish Hezbollah party. The latest elections heralded the rise of various smaller far-left and right-wing parties, key among them the Free Cause Party (HUDA-PAR), a movement affiliated with Kurdish Hezbollah in Turkey. This Sunni Muslim group, which is not connected with the Lebanese Shiite group of the same name, emerged in the 1990s as a combatant against the secular and socialist-oriented PKK. A 2000 crackdown by Turkish security forces effectively crippled the organization,³ but Hezbollah has since regrouped and shunned violence, instead turning to political activism and propaganda focused on the Kurds in southeastern Turkey. HUDA-PAR was created in 2012 with the goal of entering politics, and the party competed for the first time on March 30.

Nationally, HUDA-PAR earned a miniscule 0.23 percent of the vote. Even in the ten far southeastern Kurdish provinces, plus nearby Bingol, the party garnered just 2.47 percent support, against the hefty 50.23 percent share taken by the secular BDP. Notably, though, HUDA-PAR crossed 5 percent in two provinces—Batman, where it received 7.1 percent, and Diyarbakir, where it received 5.4 percent. In Bingol, the party came close to that benchmark, earning 4.85 percent.

In a number of mostly contiguous districts, too, HUDA-PAR far exceeded its national and regional averages. For instance, along the anti-Taurus mountain range, in Diyarbakir's Ergani and Cermik districts and Bingol's Genc and Solhan districts, the party received 9.21, 8.77, 8.63, and 7.07 percent of the vote, respectively. Similarly, along the northern rim of the Mardin massif in the Cinar district (Diyarbakir province) and the Mazidagi district (Mardin province), the party took 14.86 and 8.9 percent, respec-

tively. In a third microregion, along the Batman River, HUDA-PAR again performed well, receiving 7.4 percent in the Besiri district, 7 in the Kozluk district, and 6.97 in the Batman district (all in Batman province).

Outside of these three microregions, Kurdish Hezbollah's political wing had a standout performance in the mayoral race in the Korkut district (Mus province), where its candidate earned 40.13 percent, against the AKP winner's 53.6 percent.

Relative swing among Alawites to the far left. Turkey's southernmost Hatay province is home to most of the country's half-million-to-a-million-strong ethnic Arab Alawite residents. Since the 2013 Gezi Park protests, Hatay Alawites have held rallies criticizing the AKP government's socially conservative and authoritarian policies, as well as Turkey's anti-Assad Syria policy. Growing Alawite frustration largely centers on the Syria policy, with the Syrian Alawites and their leader, Bashar al-Assad, perceived to be in danger. Further fueling tensions is the sense of disenfranchisement under the AKP, which has no Alawites in its cadres, rallying many Alawites to the anti-AKP forefront. Accordingly, of the six civilians killed by the police since the Gezi rallies began in May 2013, seven were Alawites or Alevis.

The March election results reflected such Alawite mobilization and potential radicalization against the AKP. Traditionally, the secular-minded Alawite community has tended to vote for social democratic and center-left parties, including the CHP. However, on March 30, far leftists made an appearance in Alawite-majority Hatay districts, signaling a political shift among the province's disaffected Alawite community. In the Samandag district, for example, the Maoist Workers' Party (IP) received 13.6 percent of the vote, a stark contrast to the 0.25 percent support the party received nationwide. In Defne, another Alawite-majority district, the Turkish Communist Party (TKP) received 5.7 percent, against just 0.11 percent support nationally, and the IP received 4.5 percent.

Despite these tilts, most Hatay Alawites remained strongly aligned with the CHP, which received 36 percent support in the province, while far leftist parties received 2.7 percent support. More striking still,

the CHP received 72 percent of the vote in Samandag and 82 percent in Defne—a record high for the CHP in any district on March 30.

Swing among Alevis in Tunceli to the far left. The Alevis are a secular group constituting approximately 10 to 20 percent of Turkey's population. Professing a liberal and Sufi-inspired approach to religion, the Alevis are roughly to Islam what Unitarian Universalists are to Christianity. The Alawites, by contrast, are a much smaller community of about a million people who practice a deeply devout, esoteric version of Islam.

Even as they are distinct groups, Alevis and Alawites align politically thanks to their heterodoxy, historic marginalization, and shared visceral suspicion of the AKP's Sunni Islamic tilt. Alevis, too, have been at the forefront of the anti-AKP rallies. After the police cracked down on the Gezi demonstrators in June 2013, taking over Istanbul's central square, the rallies continued in predominantly Alevi and Alawite neighborhoods in Turkish cities, including Dikmen in Ankara and Antakya, the center of Hatay province.

The Alevi community's concerns stem not only from the AKP's Syria policy—which is seen as largely pro-Sunni—but also from the AKP's straitjacket-like social conservatism. The Alevis are simply not represented in the upper echelons of the AKP, which has ruled Turkey longer than any other democratically elected party since Turkey first became a multiparty democracy in 1950.

AKP power since 2002 thus represents the first time in modern Turkey of near-total marginalization of the Alevi community. A historical memory of discrimination and persecution under the late Ottoman Empire in combination with the current alienation has had a severe impact on the Alevi and Alawite communities. The result is a political instinct: active opposition to the AKP through street politics and demonstrations, as well as a relative swing to the far left. This phenomenon is most clearly visible in Tunceli, Turkey's only Alevi-majority province and a Kurdish-majority province.

Tunceli has been an outlier in Turkish politics and even in Alevi politics, since leftist parties have tradi-

tionally won the province by a wide majority and far leftist parties have had noticeable showing in the polls. On March 30, though, far leftist parties expanded their base. Collectively, movements including the Maoist IP, Euro-communist TKP, socialist Freedom and Solidarity Party (ODP), communist People's Liberation Party (HKP), and Marxist-Leninist Labor Party (EMEP) received 10.43 percent of the vote in Tunceli, compared with a tiny 0.48 percent support across the country.

More specifically, the ODP received 32 percent of the vote in Tunceli's Mazgirt district, where it trailed the winning BDP by only 3.76 percent, nearly capturing the mayor's seat. In the Nazimiye district, the TKP won 13.69 percent of the vote. More significantly, in Ovacik it received 36 percent, taking the mayor's seat and marking the first time the communists have won elected office in Turkey.

Erdogan's Winning Election Strategy

One takeaway message from this study of Turkish voting patterns is that the Kurdish voting bloc could be a key to Erdogan's success should he run in the August 2014 presidential elections. To achieve the presidency, Erdogan must amass 50 percent of the electorate—and the Kurds will be crucial in helping him get there. Should Erdogan secure Kurdish nationalist votes from BDP backers, with the same percentages as in the recent elections—43+ and 6 percent—he could win. And though Erdogan's record of good relations with and support for the Kurds may not be enough to win over the entire voting bloc, the prime minister has a trump card: the possible devolving of some powers to Kurdish provinces—that is, limited autonomy—in exchange for Kurdish votes in August.

In addition to his potential short-term approach to the Kurdish issue, Erdogan's long-term political strategy is anchored in two related elements: his record, since 2002, of implementing sound economic policies and of delivering phenomenal economic growth. Turkey grows because the AKP attracts international investors, while providing economic and political stability. This trend is reinforced by Turkey's steady 4.4 percent growth for 2013—strong compared to most European nations—despite suggestions by some ana-

lysts that the Gezi protests would harm the country's investment-worthiness. Such achievements have paved the way to consecutive election victories.

Another important factor for Erdogan's popularity can be seen ironically in his image as an "authoritarian underdog." His ability to challenge his detractors is well received by core AKP voters. Erdogan portrays himself as a political victim who needs to crack down harshly on those who undermine his authority through "conspiracies." With his political strategy of victimization and demonization of the opposition combined with an undeniable economic success story, Erdogan has created a powerful cult of personality that will continue to secure sizable electoral support. The local election results have probably confirmed for Erdogan that his strategy works, preparing the Turkish prime minister for a likely presidential run this coming August.

The Turkish prime minister has three likely paths forward.⁴ The first involves seeking the presidency after converting the Turkish government from a parliamentary system—which acknowledges certain limited powers for the president—into a presidential system. This path, requiring both a parliamentary vote and a referendum, is a tall order. The second option involves retaining the status quo, in which Erdogan stays on as prime minister and enlists another AKP member to run for president. This would require revising the AKP's internal charter to allow party officials to hold the same office for more than three terms—an additional term as prime minister would be Erdogan's fourth. Under this scenario, current Turkish president Abdullah Gul could run for president, allowing for a less polarizing race than one including Erdogan, given Gul's cross-party appeal. Still, this is the least desired option for the Turkish prime minister, who is eager to take the seat once filled by Ataturk, and to do so through a popular vote—a goal that he will view as achievable given the local election results. The third and most likely scenario for Erdogan is to run for president under the present system. If Erdogan becomes president under the current constitution, a caretaker prime minister will fill in, similar to the Russian model pioneered by Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev.

Notes

1. All data comes from the Turkish daily *Hurriyet* and news channel A Haber.
2. Central and eastern Turkey includes Konya, Kirsehir, Adiyaman, Nevsehir, Kahramanmaraş, Yozgat, Sivas, Corum, Cankiri, Nigde, Amasya, Aksaray, Tokat, Erzincan, Erzurum, Elazig, Malatya, Kirikkale, Kayseri, Karaman, and Bayburt.
3. For a detailed study of Kurdish Hezbollah, see Rusen Cakir, *The Reemergence of Hizballah in Turkey*, Policy Focus 74 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute, 2007), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/documents/pubs/policyfocus74initial.pdf>.
4. For a detailed study of Turkey's forthcoming presidential elections, see Soner Cagaptay and James F. Jeffrey, Policy Notes 17, *Turkey's 2014 Political Transition: From Erdogan to Erdogan?* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute, 2014), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-2014-political-transition>.