

Why Recep Tayyip Erdogan Will Be Turkey's First Directly Elected President

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Aug 7, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Erdogan holds several trump cards that make him the unquestioned front-runner in a landmark election.

When Turkey holds direct presidential elections for the first time on Aug. 10, the people will speak. Turks are eager to be heard following a wave of protests in the last year against Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, which were followed by a violent police crackdown. Erdogan faces criticism for his authoritarian leadership style, as well as corruption allegations. Yet it is all but guaranteed that he will be Turkey's first popularly elected president. Why? It is a numbers game.

Local elections on March 30 brought the AKP 45% of the vote. The two main Turkish opposition parties, the Republican People's Party and the Nationalist Action Party, together also received 45% and announced their joint presidential candidate. This move splits the Turkish public about evenly into pro- and anti-Erdogan camps, but the prime minister holds several trump cards.

The first is perhaps the most obvious: The economy has tripled in size since the Erdogan administration came to power in 2002. As the rest of the world suffered from the 2008 economic crisis, economic growth and development in Turkey continued unabated. AKP policies over a decade have improved the country's infrastructure and raised living standards significantly.

This is why Erdogan continues to enjoy widespread support. He wins because he offers high-speed rail and mortgages. The high-speed rail system he built includes a recently inaugurated line from Ankara to Istanbul that halves travel time from seven hours to three and a half. Meanwhile, inflation -- historically at dizzying three-digit levels -- has come down to single digits, allowing many Turks to buy their first homes using a new mortgage system.

The base rallies around this economic success, but it will not bring Erdogan a simple majority; a boost from voters in the Kurdish community at home will. The prime minister's charm offensive with the Kurds -- who account for 15% to

20% of the country's population -- will secure their votes. The Erdogan administration passed reforms advancing Kurdish linguistic and cultural rights and laid the groundwork for the disarmament and reintegration of Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, militants into Turkish society.

The 2013 cease-fire declared by the PKK's jailed leader, Abdullah Ocalan -- a victory that had proved elusive for other parties for more than 30 years -- stemmed violence in Turkey's predominantly Kurdish southeast and helped the AKP win local elections in March. Since then, a new law has created a framework for formal peace talks with the PKK, and Erdogan revealed further plans to devolve some powers to Kurdish provinces. The Kurdish nationalist Peace and Democracy Party, which received 6.5% of the vote in March, is thus virtually guaranteed to back Erdogan should there be a runoff.

A year ago, it looked as though protests could bring down the administration, but the political fallout has proved to be relatively modest. Erdogan has a knack for portraying himself as a political victim forced to crack down harshly on those who use lies and conspiracies to undermine his government. He is the man leading Turkey into an ever-brighter, more peaceful future in the face of challenges from a malicious opposition. What he lacks in diplomatic tact, he makes up for in passion. He pushes his vision for Turkey with the conviction that even his least popular decisions hold paramount the best interests of Turkish citizens.

The dark side of this electoral strategy, of course, is that his image as an authoritarian underdog demonizes the opposition and creates a powerful -- and dangerous -- cult of personality. With that as his shield, he has time to play the numbers. Turkey's economic successes of the last decade will carry him most of the way to victory, and his campaign focus on the margins will push him over the top. But once elected, Erdogan is likely to consolidate all three branches of government. He will then become Turkey's strongman president, one elected by Turks themselves.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, and author of [The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power>) (Potomac Books). Beril Unver is senior programs officer at the Pacific Council on International Policy in Los Angeles. ❖

Los Angeles Times

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)