

Turks in Europe and Kurds in Turkey Could Elect Erdogan

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Brief Analysis

Erdogan's strategy in the August presidential polls envisions strong support among European Turks in the first round of voting, and backing from nationalist Kurds in case of a second round.

On August 10, Turks will go to the polls to choose a new president for the first time in the country's history, an electoral change ushered in by a 2010 constitutional amendment. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the longtime prime minister and leader of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), is on the ballot, as is Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, joint candidate for the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and Nationalist Action Party (MHP).

In the March 30 local government elections, the CHP-MHP bloc and the AKP each received 43% of the vote. This leaves two voter blocs as potential kingmakers in next month's polls: Kurdish nationalists, whose Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) received 6.5% of the March vote, and Turks residing overseas, who will be allowed to vote abroad for the first time following a 2012 change to the electoral system.

OVERSEAS TURKS: A POTENT NEW BLOC

According to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, nearly 5 million citizens currently live abroad, including 4 million in Western Europe. Data from the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities, a government agency, indicates that 2.5 million Turks live in Germany, 540,000 in France, 384,000 in the Netherlands, 160,000 in Belgium, and 112,000 in Austria. Half of the overseas electorate resides in Germany, where around 1.4 million voters are eligible to cast ballots in the presidential election. To put this figure in perspective, Germany has essentially become the fourth-largest Turkish electoral district after Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. By comparison, there are 87,000 registered Turkish voters in the United States.

Previously, Turkey allowed voting by citizens living abroad only if they returned home during the election season. This requirement was a clear burden -- in the 2011 parliamentary elections, for example, only 5% of the 2.5 million registered overseas voters cast ballots. Yet the revised electoral law will allow 2.8 million citizens to vote while remaining abroad -- or 5% of the total number of registered voters, which stood at 56 million as of June 24.

For this election, ballot boxes will be available in countries where more than 500 Turks live, including at 103 diplomatic missions in fifty-four nations. They will also be available at forty-four Turkish border crossings for those traveling during the election season. Overseas voters are therefore expected to turn out in large numbers. And given the close race between the AKP and CHP-MHP bloc, they could decide the outcome.

If no candidate receives more than 50% of the vote in the first round, there will be a runoff on August 24 between the top two candidates. The overseas election period is July 31-August 3 for the first round, and August 17-20 for the second. These earlier dates will allow time for shipping the ballots to Turkey so they can be counted on election day alongside domestic ballots, with the aim of preventing delays in tabulating the total results.

MOBILIZING OVERSEAS CONSERVATIVES

Turks living abroad tend to be more conservative than homeland Turks. According to the 2012 "Turks in Germany" survey conducted by German research groups Info and Liljeberg, 37% of Turkish-origin respondents in that country stated that they have strong religious beliefs. By comparison, only 16% of respondents living in Turkey answered along the same lines in a 2009 study by Ali Carkoglu and Ersin Kalaycioglu. Moreover, while 49.5% of homeland Turks voted for Erdogan in the 2011 elections, 61.5% of overseas voters did so (though as noted above, only 5% of eligible overseas voters cast ballots that year). Against this backdrop, Erdogan's recent visits to Germany (May 24), Austria (June 19), and France (June 21) were de facto campaign rallies to help him win the presidency.

Further illustrating this trend, the most popular Turkish associations in Europe are religious in nature, since many Turks living abroad see Islam as an important element in keeping their Turkish identity. One of these associations, Islamic Community National Outlook (IGMG), has 514 mosques in Europe, of which 323 are in Germany. IGMG was formed in 1995 as an umbrella organization for the Milli Gorus (National Outlook) movement, the ideological incubator of Islamist factions in Turkey since the 1960s.

In Germany, the IGMG is under strict watch by the Bundesamt fur Verfassungsschutz, a domestic intelligence agency set up after World War II in part to protect the country against antidemocratic movements. In a 2002 report, the agency described IGMG as "a threat to German democracy." In 2003, Turkey's newly elected AKP government reportedly instructed overseas diplomatic missions to include IGMG and other Milli Gorus groups "in all events or festivities organized by the embassies and consulates."

The Union of European Turkish Democrats (UETD), founded in 2004, is a more direct AKP proxy association that lobbies for the party in Europe, with forty-six branches in Germany and thirteen in the rest of the continent. AKP ministers and advisors frequently visit these branches and hold gatherings there. The UETD has also organized large events with Erdogan's participation or in his name, including past rallies in Cologne (2008) and Dusseldorf (2011), last year's "Respect for Democracy" demonstration to support Erdogan after the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, and several events this year: a February gathering in Berlin, a May gathering in Cologne, a June 19 rally in Vienna, and another two days later in Lyon.

KURDS FOR ERDOGAN?

Kurdish votes in Europe and Turkey could also boost Erdogan's chances of winning the presidency. Proportionally speaking, there are more ethnic Kurds among the European Turkish community than among the domestic Turkish population. A 2013 survey by KONDA, an Istanbul-based polling agency, put the proportion of ethnic Kurds

in Turkey at 17.7%. According to the Kurdish Institute of Paris, an estimated 1.3 million Kurds live in Western Europe, including some 800,000 in Germany alone, where they constitute around 25-30% of the Turkish-origin population.

Currently, the Kurdish nationalist BDP has fielded its own presidential candidate, Selahattin Demirtas. Yet the BDP is a minor party, and if a second round of voting is held, it would be a contest between Erdogan and the CHP-MHP candidate, leaving Demirtas out. Erdogan has therefore sought to build support among the Kurds to win their votes in a potential runoff, in part by taking a conciliatory attitude toward Kurdish nationalism. Prompted by improved ties with the Iraqi Kurds, he entered peace talks with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) despite its past status as a terrorist group and its long, bloody struggle against the government. On June 26, he declared a new "reform package" on the Kurdish issue that formalized the talks with the PKK. If those negotiations conclude successfully, Erdogan has promised to provide amnesty to thousands of PKK fighters.

The AKP government has also granted the Kurds additional language rights, which had long been seen as a threat to Turkish nationalism. Ankara now funds the use of Kurdish language from universities to city governments in southeastern Turkey, where the Kurds dominate demographically.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TURKISH POLITICS

Erdogan's electoral strategy envisions strong support among European Turks in the first round of voting, and backing from nationalist Kurds in case of a second round. Together, the Turks in Europe and the Kurds could help Erdogan win the 50% of the vote needed to become president.

The Kurdish leg of this strategy could have a number of pitfalls, however. Until recently, Erdogan was not known for embracing Kurdish nationalism, so he could renege on his promises to the Kurds after securing his own victory in August and his party's victory in next year's parliamentary elections. For their part, many pro-PKK Kurds do not like Erdogan -- socialist and leftist in orientation, they take issue with his social conservatism. Accordingly, any political deal between him and these Kurds could easily be undermined. One risk in this regard is the unfavorable composition of the PKK leadership, which was reshuffled last year when several hardliners ascended to top positions (see "[Leadership Reshuffle: PKK Makes Changes in Its Ranks](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/leadership-reshuffle-pkk-makes-changes-in-its-ranks)," February 26, 2014

[\(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/leadership-reshuffle-pkk-makes-changes-in-its-ranks>\)\).](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/leadership-reshuffle-pkk-makes-changes-in-its-ranks)

For now, though, Kurdish support could greatly facilitate Erdogan's presidential ambitions and the AKP's 2015 electoral prospects. And if the party prevails next year, it could open the path for further constitutional amendments that replace Turkey's parliament-centric system with a presidential system -- with Erdogan at the helm.

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[\(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power>\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power) (Potomac Books). *Ege Cansu Sacikara is the Yvonne Silverman Research Assistant at the Institute.* ❖

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