

Turkey's Local Elections: Liberal Middle-Class Voters Abandon AKP

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Brief Analysis

On March 29, Turkish voters went to the polls to elect mayors of more than eighty cities and two thousand smaller municipalities, as well as members of eighty-one provincial councils. Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) won 39 percent of the vote, the main opposition Republican Peoples Party (CHP) and Nationalist Action Party (MHP) won 23 percent and 16 percent respectively, and the remainder went to smaller parties. The March 29 poll was the first election in which the AKP has seen a drop in support since coming to power in 2002, a result due largely to the flight of liberal middle-class voters from the party. This noticeable drop in support from such an important voter class is likely to have significant consequences for the AKP and the future of Turkish politics.

The AKP's Performance

Views differ as to whether Turkey's local elections can be seen as a measure of success for the country's major political parties. Since local elections are held nationwide, they could represent a broad survey of party popularity. In local elections, however, Turks tend to vote for individual candidates rather than for parties per se, and these polls are therefore an imperfect measure of a party's national popularity.

Nonetheless, incumbent parties tend to do well in local elections. Because Turkey has a centralized political system, local governments cannot levy significant taxes and therefore rely on the central government for funding. Accordingly, national incumbent parties do well in local elections, often outperforming their record in parliamentary elections, with the voters picking the governing party candidates to secure funding for local governments. This was not the case on March 29, and AKP support dipped eight percentage points compared to the 2007 parliamentary elections.

Middle-Class Flight from AKP

The AKP remains the largest party in Turkey. In big cities, the party continues to enjoy a strong standing in the conservative working- and lower-middle-class districts (varos) due to a combination of Tammany-Hall-style clientalist politics and government-sanctioned social conservatism. Nevertheless, in big cities, the AKP is slipping, especially among middle-class voters. On March 29, the AKP lost control of two of the country's sixteen metropolitan areas (Adana and Antalya). More importantly, in Turkey's three largest cities -- Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, home to over 20 million of the country's 72 million inhabitants -- support for the AKP dwindled or stagnated, while the opposition CHP and MHP surged. Although the AKP kept control of Istanbul and Ankara in tight races, its support in Istanbul leveled off from 45 percent in 2004 to 44 percent in 2009, while in Ankara, backing for the party dropped from 55 percent in 2004 to 38 percent in 2009.

The AKP's loss has been the opposition's gain. The CHP increased its share of the vote in Istanbul from 29 percent in 2004 to 37 percent in 2009, and in Ankara, the CHP shot up from 13 percent in 2004 to 32 percent in 2009. The MHP did well, too, increasing its portion of the vote in Ankara from 5 percent in 2004 to 27 percent in 2009. The AKP also plateaued in Izmir, garnering 31 percent of the vote in 2009, down two percentage points from 2004. The CHP kept Izmir; its popularity there swelled from 47 percent in 2004 to 55 percent in 2009.

Analyzing the results shows that the AKP faltered in the three largest cities and in other cities with over a million inhabitants, such as Bursa, Adana, and Antalya, because it lost ground in middle-class districts, despite maintaining or increasing support in the varos. For instance, in Istanbul, support for the AKP in the varos of Esenler increased from 42 percent in 2004 to 48 percent in 2009. Meanwhile, the CHP's share of the vote remained stable in this district at 14 percent. In middle-class Kadikoy district, on the other hand, the AKP's support dropped from 33 percent in 2004 to 22 percent in 2009, while backing for the CHP surged from 51 percent in 2004 to 68 percent in 2009. The CHP also did well in a number of less-wealthy middle-class districts in Istanbul such as Sariyer and Maltepe.

In other cities, support for the AKP dropped in middle-class districts as well. In Bursa's Nilufer district, for instance, the AKP slipped six percentage points, while the CHP gained ten percentage points and the MHP three percentage points.

Why Has AKP's Support Dwindled?

The AKP has lost sway among middle-class voters because the party has strayed from its promise of a liberal, European Turkey. The AKP was established in 2001 out of the ashes of its predecessor, the Islamist Welfare Party (RP), which espoused an anti-American and anti-European platform enshrined in the Milli Gorus (National Outlook) ideology of the RP. The AKP publicly abandoned this platform, and its strategy worked at a time when Turkey's center-right parties

imploded due to corruption and mismanagement. The AKP filled the void, attracting liberal middle-class voters with its promise of a liberal Turkey and European Union accession. The party added these liberal middle-class voters to its two existing constituencies, the varos voters and the central and east-central Anatolian voters attracted by the party's Milli Gorus roots.

In addition to the AKP's drift away from the EU since 2005, Turkish analysts and media reports cite three other factors that explain the middle-class flight from the AKP. First, allegations of high-level corruption involving the party's leaders seem to have tarnished the AKP's image among middle-class voters. Second, a sense of the AKP's increasing lack of acceptance of dissenting views, such as secular and liberal media outlets, has helped create an intolerant image of the party. Finally, even though the Ergenekon case ostensibly aims to prosecute alleged coup plotters, the AKP government has used it as an excuse to intimidate journalists and scholars who oppose the AKP and to create a culture of illegal wiretaps -- both unpopular policies with the middle class.

Who Will Adopt the Liberal Option?

The AKP has seen its constituency narrow. In addition to losing its middle-class backers, the party also lost ground to the nationalist MHP along the western Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean coasts as well as in the inner Aegean region, most likely because of its "Kurdish charm offensive," which included a recent launch of a Kurdish-language public television station. Despite this offensive, the AKP has also lost votes to the Kurdish nationalist Democratic Society Party (DTP) in southeastern Turkey. The AKP is torn between two options: to be a popular party that leads Turkey responsibly or a populist party led by sensationalist and Peronist impulses. Only weeks before the polls, AKP leader and Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan verbally assaulted Turkey's liberal media, asking the electorate in rallies "to not allow certain papers in their homes," a move that might have cost him liberal middle-class votes. The party's populism has prevented it from sticking to its former liberal agenda. The AKP could hope to regain its liberal middle-class base if it shied away from populism and focused instead on being once again a popular, responsible party.

The challenge for the left-nationalist CHP and the right-nationalist MHP is to welcome their new liberal middle-class voters and move to the center. Turkey's previous center-right parties almost entirely disappeared in these elections, with their votes going to either the CHP or the MHP. In Adana, for instance, the center-right Democrat Party (DP) suffered a twelve-percentage-point drop in support from the 2004 elections, and the AKP's share of the vote shrank by ten percentage points. In Adana, the CHP and MHP were the only parties to grow in a meaningful way, by nine and twenty-one percentage points respectively, suggesting they are now home to the voters fleeing the AKP and DP. If the CHP and MHP can accommodate liberal voters while keeping their bases, these parties could prove to be a permanent home to the middle classes that have now, for the most part, abandoned the AKP.

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