

# Local Elections in Turkey: A Landslide Victory for the Incumbent AKP

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

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## 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.



## Brief Analysis

On March 28, 2004, Turks voted in nationwide municipal elections for the mayors of more than 3,000 cities and towns, as well as administrative council members for all eighty-one Turkish provinces. Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) won an overwhelming victory, increasing its national standing. With 41.8 percent of the vote -- almost 8 percent more than in the November 2002 general elections that catapulted the party to power -- the AKP emerged, by a wide margin, as the most popular party in Turkey. The opposition was weak; together, the three main opposition parties -- the social-democrat Republican Peoples Party (CHP), the nationalist/center-right True Path Party (DYP), and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) -- received fewer votes (38.6 percent) than the AKP alone (41.8 percent). What are the implications of Turkey's new political landscape for Turkish domestic and foreign policy?

### AKP's Power Base

The AKP's electoral success owes largely to its broad-based appeal. Like a political "lasagna," AKP blends alternating layers of Islamist, formerly Islamist, and center-right members and voters. In this configuration, the AKP is attractive to multiple segments of society. The party leadership, promoting a center-right, conservative agenda, is generally comprised of members from the banned Islamist Welfare Party (RP) who now mostly ignore their RP heritage. In the middle layer are provincial functionaries and grass-roots activists, many of whom subscribe to the RP's (Islamist) National Outlook Movement (Milli Gorus, MG). Finally, at the bottom, there is a mixed electorate that is roughly two-thirds center-right and one-third Islamist. The leadership of the party successfully attracts center-right voters, while the grass-roots activists appeal to Islamists from the RP. Since the AKP's national leadership does not satisfy the political ambitions of the party's Islamist voters, the AKP has allocated to these voters precious rent-distributing mayorships. Indeed, almost 80 percent of AKP mayoral candidates on March 28 represented the MG.

### Who Will Challenge the AKP?

Reinforcing Turkey's image as a country with a predominantly conservative voter base, the share of the electoral pie consumed by the Turkish left on March 28 shrunk to among its smallest ever; the two left-wing parties, the CHP and the Democratic Left Party (DSP), received only 20.3 percent of the vote. Support for parties on the right grew to 70.2

percent, from 63.6 percent in November 2002. The main right-wing party, the AKP, was able to capitalize on this development. In fact, the AKP received over twice as many votes as the CHP. Support for the CHP fell to 18.1 percent on March 28 from more than 19.4 percent in November 2002, as the party lost some prominent left-wing bastions to the AKP, including the southern cities of Antalya, Gaziantep, parts of the Aegean coast, and Thrace. The CHP under the leadership of Deniz Baykal has lost popularity with the majority urban working and middle-class voters, who are now turning to other parties, including the AKP, in increasing numbers. In Istanbul, for example, the AKP now controls the twenty-three working and middle-class districts out of Istanbul's thirty total districts, with the CHP's support restricted to the upper-middle class districts of Kadikoy, Sisli, Bakirkoy, and Besiktas.

The CHP has been defeated yet again, and the only challenge facing the AKP seems to be forming on the right. Turkish nationalism is still a potent force in Turkey, and the AKP is no more the sole contender for right-wing votes. In this election, the DYP and MHP made slight gains on their previous results, each achieving 10 percent of the vote. The total vote for non-AKP right-wing parties, which was 26.5 percent in November 2002, climbed to 28.1 percent on March 28. The current, fast-moving negotiations toward resolving the Cyprus conflict seem to have rejuvenated the DYP and MHP, while some potential AKP voters who think that the AKP is giving too much too soon on Cyprus may be moving to those two parties. Such voters will continue to drift away from the AKP if the Cyprus negotiations remain on the fast track.

A second source of tension on the right emanates from the Felicity Party (SP), former prime minister Necmettin Erbakan's latest Islamist political incarnation. Some hardcore Islamist voters, who subscribe to the MG's depiction of the European Union (EU) as a Christian club with which Turkey should not be affiliated, feel uncomfortable with the AKP's pro-EU agenda, and are, accordingly, returning to Erbakan. The SP, which hit rock bottom in November 2002 with only 2.4 percent of the vote, increased its support to 4 percent on March 28.

#### The Decline of Kurdish Nationalism?

The main political arm of the Kurdish nationalist movement, the Democratic People's Party (DEHAP), entered Sunday's elections in a coalition with five small socialist parties, yet together these parties received fewer votes (5 percent) than the DEHAP received alone in the 2002 elections (6.1 percent). All over Turkey, DEHAP voters are defecting to the AKP. In the 2002 elections, while the DEHAP polled more than 5 percent in both Istanbul and Izmir, support for the party in these cities fell to 3 percent on March 28. Such a decline is reflective of the intense assimilation taking place among Kurds in western Turkey. As Kurds in this part of the country feel the pull of middle-class life, settle into mixed neighborhoods and schools, and intermarry with Turks, Kurdish nationalism loses some of its old appeal. These assimilated Kurds, mostly conservative Sunni Muslims, are generally turning to the AKP -- such as in the mostly Kurdish Buca district of Izmir, or the Bagcilar and Esenler districts of Istanbul, where the AKP won with 37 percent, 44 percent, and 42 percent of the vote, respectively.

Support for the DEHAP is also eroding in the east, where many Kurds at ease with the AKP's conservative agenda also appear to be moving away from Kurdish nationalism. In the November 2002 elections, the AKP received a plurality of the vote in twelve eastern provinces. Today, the DEHAP dominates only in the remaining few bastions of Kurdish nationalism: Diyarbakir, Batman, Hakkari, Mardin, and Sirnak.

#### Foreign Policy Implications

The AKP will continue to pursue EU membership for Turkey, a policy that has brought the party so many center-right votes. However, a failure to obtain a date for EU accession at the December 2004 EU summit or the achievement of a Cyprus settlement that is unsatisfactory to most Turks could result in a nationalist anti-EU outburst. This could easily spark a backlash against the AKP, strengthening the MHP and DYP.

With regard to Middle East policy, the AKP will certainly use the upcoming June 2004 Istanbul NATO Summit to

showcase Turkey's success as the only democratic and secular country in the Muslim world. However, the AKP is also likely to remain unenthusiastic about the Bush administration's proposed Greater Middle East Initiative and will align itself with the more European approach, viewing resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a prerequisite to the pursuit of sincere reform efforts in the region. This alignment, along with recent declarations by the AKP that party officials will not visit Israel anytime soon, may portend change in the Turkish-Israeli friendship that had strengthened during the past decade.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Brock Dahl, an intern for The Washington Institute's Turkish Research Program.

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