

Local Elections in Turkey: A Justice and Development Party Landslide?

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Mar 25, 2004

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Brief Analysis

On March 28, Turks will go to the polls in nationwide local elections to vote for mayors and more than 90,000 council seats in 3,184 towns and cities. The outcome of these elections will not change the composition of Turkey's current Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, which came to power in a political landslide in November 2002, receiving 34 percent of the popular vote and two-thirds of the seats in the legislature. Nevertheless, according to surveys, AKP may win as much as 50 percent of the votes on March 28, securing the mayorships of most Turkish cities, including Istanbul and Ankara. Such a sweeping victory would be unusual in Turkey, where more than a dozen parties usually run in local elections and where a given party is deemed successful if it receives more than 20 percent of the vote. These developments raise two crucial questions: Why is AKP receiving such immense electoral support? And would an overwhelming victory in the upcoming elections politically embolden the party to revive its seemingly dormant Islamist roots?

Reasons for AKP's Success

There are a number of factors behind the party's anticipated landslide in the March 28 elections:

AKP is still unchallenged on the right, where it fills a huge political vacuum: Given Turkey's essentially conservative character -- two-thirds of Turkish voters are conservatives -- the electorate traditionally gives its mandate to right-wing parties. Left-wing parties typically receive approximately one-third of the Turkish vote and have never obtained a majority. The decline of Turkey's established center-right parties at the end of the 1990s -- a decade marked by inefficient coalition governments, corruption scandals, and three successive economic depressions -- left AKP as the only contender for the right-wing vote in Turkey. Hence, with no serious competition from the right, AKP will attract most of the conservative voters on March 28.

Governing parties tend to do well in local elections in Turkey: Since Turkey's political structure is heavily centralized, local governments do not have significant means of raising their own funds. Rather, they are dependent on Ankara. Hence, in local elections, Turks often support the ruling party in order to ensure a flow of government funds to their towns. This dynamic will boost AKP's success even in the southeast, one of Turkey's most conservative regions. There, many Kurds are already at ease with AKP's conservative agenda and have lately begun to turn away

from the Kurdish nationalist Democratic People's Party (DEHAP). Such individuals could easily switch to AKP in order to secure government money for their towns.

A mostly pliant Turkish media has made AKP's job easy: Since AKP's ascent to power, significant parts of the Turkish media -- whose considerable business interests traditionally depend on good relations with the Turkish government -- have veered away from harsh criticism of the ruling party. This has helped AKP maintain its image of clean, efficient governance, the promise that catapulted the party to power in the first place in November 2002.

The Turkish economy seems to be stable: After the economically tumultuous 1990s (culminating in the contraction of the Turkish economy by 9.5 percent in 2001), AKP seems to have delivered economic stability to Turkey. In 2003, the Turkish economy grew by an estimated 5.1 percent, and in February 2004, for the first time in thirty-four years, inflation fell below 10 percent. This is welcome news to most Turks, whose well-being had been threatened by successive economic crises and decades of chronic inflation.

Where Will AKP Go from Here?

As mentioned previously, election mandates over 50 percent are extremely rare in Turkey. Since 1955, only one party has passed this crucial threshold (the Justice Party of former president Suleyman Demirel received 53 percent of the vote in the 1965 parliamentary elections). AKP may well reach this plateau on March 28, however. In the leader-driven world of Turkish politics, this would tempt the charismatic AKP leader and Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to interpret the election results as popular mandate and usher in a period of active majority rule.

As a result, AKP's small but vocal core of Islamist voters, who control the party's grassroots organizations, might then press Erdogan to abandon the party's compromising stance on secularism in favor of polarization. Specifically, they could urge the prime minister to confront Turkey's secular bloc (which includes the judiciary, the military, as well as various political parties, civil society groups, and media outlets) by immediately addressing some of the country's most symbolically combustible issues (e.g., the wearing of headscarves). Such polarization would antagonize the secular bloc to an extent not seen since the late 1990s.

Recent developments indicate that AKP may already be amenable to the demands of its Islamist core. Although AKP's inclusion of some female and center-right candidates in the November 2002 parliamentary elections indicated that the party was moving toward the center, the March 28 elections may highlight AKP's lingering Islamist legacy. On March 2, Turkish columnist Sedat Ergin wrote in the Turkish daily *Hurriyet* that "as many as 80 percent of the candidates fielded by AKP in the local elections may be from the Milli Gorus (National Outlook) school" of Turkey's banned Islamist Welfare Party. Moreover, the number of female AKP candidates is dismal. Although women are generally underrepresented in the cutthroat competitive environment of Turkish politics, the declining percentage of women in AKP's ranks is particularly notable, going from small (3.86 percent of AKP members elected to the parliament in November 2002) to nearly nonexistent (16 out of 3,184 of the AKP candidates for mayor in the upcoming elections).

Implications of an AKP Landslide

If AKP achieves a sweeping electoral victory on March 28, the party might become more confident and therefore more emboldened in its foreign policy. For example, in a move that would appease the European Union, the party might try to break ground in the stalled Cyprus negotiations (Erdogan is scheduled to join the ongoing talks on March 29) by moving closer to the Greek demands. Regarding the Middle East, Erdogan might find himself tempted to placate the party's grassroots supporters by pursuing closer relations with Turkey's Muslim neighbors.

Domestically, an AKP victory would be the second phase of the party's sweep over Turkish politics (the first phase, the November 2002 elections, gave the party two-thirds of the parliament, enough to amend the constitution). With

the parliament and most local governments under its control, AKP would become the unchallenged behemoth of Turkish democracy. The only arm of government not ruled by the party would be the presidency, which has a onetime veto power over legislation. The term of Turkey's current president -- Ahmet Necdet Sezer, whose immense popularity has waned over the past year following attacks from the pro-AKP press -- is slated to end in 2007. On March 9, AKP tabled a constitutional amendment to limit presidential terms to five years. If this measure passes, Sezer would have to step down in 2005, and AKP would elect Turkey's next president, completing its sweep of the Turkish political system and gaining unprecedented leverage against Turkey's secular bloc.

The coming months will be crucial in determining which of AKP's two faces -- the moderate face of November 2002 or the Islamist Welfare Party face of March 2004 -- will persevere in the long run. Pessimists would argue that, in the leader- and majority-driven world of Turkish politics, Erdogan would have to work hard to avoid getting carried away by AKP's Islamist legacy or using the party's election victory as a popular mandate for unchecked majority rule.

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