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November Elections in Turkey: Assessing the Ban on Justice and Development Party Leader Tayyip Erdogan

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Brief Analysis

As the United States considers a possible military campaign in Iraq, Turkey is preoccupied with its upcoming elections. Although a party with roots in Islamism will be a major contender in the November 3 elections, it is unlikely that Turkey's approach to the Iraq issue will change much, regardless of which party wins. That said, continuing political uncertainty at home could preoccupy Turkish leaders, reducing Turkey's contribution to solving the Iraq problem.

The Political Background

On September 20, the Supreme Elections Board in Ankara, an independent body that supervises elections, announced that it would not allow a number of politicians with past convictions to run for office on November 3. One notable name among these banned politicians is Tayyip Erdogan, the leader of the conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP). Many see AKP as Islamist, and polls predict that it will emerge as Turkey's largest party in November. Erdogan's exclusion might lead to worries about polarization between the political establishment and the Islamist opposition, from which AKP could benefit. Yet, it is by no means clear that the ban will have this effect.

Erdogan was sentenced to a brief jail term in August 1998 for inciting religious hatred, at a time when he was the mayor of Istanbul and represented Necmettin Erbakan's Islamist Welfare Party (RP). Soon after, the courts banned RP. Then, the RP cadres established the Virtue Party (FP). Although this organization followed a relatively moderate line, it was shut down because its leadership largely identified with Erbakan and his extremism. Following this, the RP-FP line split into two groups. First, a doctrinaire hardcore minority led by Erbakan's proteges established the Felicity Party (SP) and remained extremist. Second, Erdogan left the RP-FP tradition with many rank-and-file members to set up AKP in 2001. Since then, AKP has risen dramatically, with recent surveys predicting that it will

win as much as 25 to 30 percent of the vote in the upcoming elections. Even Erdogan's absence is not likely to diminish AKP's overall popularity. Why does this party have such strong electoral appeal?

One reason for AKP's dramatic rise over the last couple years is the economic slump in Turkey, the worst that the country has experienced since World War II. As a result of this slump, parties in the current government will suffer serious setbacks in the upcoming elections. Even most opposition parties will likely lose ground; given the generally inefficient governance, crisis-ridden economic conditions, and endemic corruption that characterized the 1990s, most Turks view all of the governing parties as incompetent. Only two parties have escaped such stigmatization. The first of these is the social-democratic Republican Peoples Party (CHP), which has not been in power for a while. The popular politician Kemal Dervis -- a former World Bank official and Turkish economic minister -- has joined CHP, and the party may receive as much as 20 percent of the vote in November. AKP -- the second party to avoid the debasement of recent years -- may fare even better. This party was set up only last year and has never been a part of the government; hence, the Turkish electorate views it as a new organization that cannot be blamed for the dramatic problems of the last decade.

Is AKP an Islamic Party?

Because AKP is likely to emerge as Turkey's largest party in November, a key question arises: would this translate into a victory for political Islam? Many observers in Turkey and abroad think of AKP as an Islamist party. Erdogan and the party's leadership adamantly reject this characterization, though. They aggressively advertise AKP as a conservative or even liberal-conservative organization, much different from RP-FP. In accordance with this stance, AKP has disseminated moderate messages to the public over the last year. Unlike RP-FP, it has refrained from challenging secularism or implying that it will do so in the future. AKP's willingness to avoid RP-FP's controversial style is also evident in the organization's foreign policy. On Iraq, for example, the party seems to adhere to Ankara's traditional tenets. In a recent interview, AKP's second man, moderate and sophisticated Abdullah Gul, declared that his party would concede to the current Turkish foreign policy orientation in the event of American action in Iraq. In other words, as long as the planning and execution of a campaign in Iraq satisfied Ankara's concerns, AKP would pursue a policy of cautious and qualified support with an eye to Turkish security concerns.

Even so, some analysts argue that AKP's moderate rhetoric is only a cover, and that the party is really not much different from RP-FP. They add that most of AKP's cadres, as well as Erdogan himself, were trained within the RP-FP. Moreover, the increase in AKP's popularity has paralleled a decline in the popularity of the other party with origins in RP-FP, the more extremist SP. Perhaps some Islamists have decided that AKP is more likely to succeed than SP.

In fact, AKP's electoral appeal could be significantly more diverse than that of RP-FP or SP. AKP is attracting working- and middle-class voters who may not necessarily share AKP's religious concerns. Some of these voters may be dissatisfied with Turkey's economic conditions and with the performance of the established parties over the last decade. In other words, AKP has taken advantage of the fragmentation of Turkey's centrist parties to fill the void in the political center -- especially the implosion of the centrist Motherland Party (ANAP) -- thereby attracting traditionally moderate urban voters. In addition, AKP is making inroads in the rural Anatolian heartland. In this vast area, the party will steal many votes from the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which has lost much of its base over the past few years due to its pusillanimity in the current coalition. Given AKP's capacity to engage this sort of wide coalition -- embracing traditionally left-leaning and center-right classes, rural nationalists, and urban Islamists alike -- the party's electoral support may be far broader than RP-FP's loyal extremist Islamists.

What Now?

If AKP becomes Turkey's largest party, will a regime crisis emerge in Ankara? In other words, will AKP be able to achieve the legitimacy that has eluded RP-FP and SP? According to the polls, Turks are willing to give AKP the

benefit of the doubt in this regard. A symbolic example along this line was the annual ball organized by the Turkish chief of staff in honor of National Day on August 30, the equivalent of the American Fourth of July. In a sign of acknowledgement, AKP was invited to this event together with all of Turkey's major political parties, while SP was snubbed.

Yet, the Turkish political system seems to have reservations about AKP's leader. In this regard, last week's ban on Erdogan is more a personal act against him than a measure against AKP as an organization. In other words, even though Ankara might be willing to give AKP a chance to prove that it is not Islamist, it has maintained its reservations about Erdogan due to his Islamist past.

AKP may take two paths in the wake of Erdogan's banning: it could either insist on Erdogan while polarizing the political system, or it could continue with its conciliatory line by replacing Erdogan. Over the last few days, both Turkish and European judges have refused Erdogan's appeal for a reversal of his ban. Hence, AKP could either elect a new leader now, or wait until after the elections to do so. If AKP were to choose Gul -- who appears to be more liberal than Erdogan -- it would send a strong message that it is committed to working within the system. If the party continued to avoid political Islam, it could gain further acceptance from the Turkish political system. This could in turn increase AKP's legitimacy and shift the party toward the center. Given these possibilities, AKP will find itself at a crucial crossroads over the next few months leading up to and following the elections. The choices that AKP makes may have repercussions not only on the party itself, but also on the wider Turkish political system.

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