

Will Turkey Call Early Elections?

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January 11, 2018

The next domino in Erdogan's consolidation of power may soon fall, and Washington should view any short-term spike in his nationalist rhetoric through this domestic political lens.

Officially, Turkey's next parliamentary and presidential elections are not scheduled to be held until November 2019. On January 8, however, Nationalist Action Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli stated that his opposition camp would unconditionally support Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the next presidential election—a crucial pledge at a time when recent electoral results strongly indicate that Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) cannot win 50 percent of the vote in national elections and still needs a second party to secure a true parliamentary majority. Along with other political, economic, and diplomatic developments, the seemingly premature timing of Bahçeli's declaration suggests that snap elections could be in the offing.

If so, Erdogan will likely accelerate his consolidation of power at home, further jeopardizing Turkish democracy. Washington can also expect him to dig in his heels on Kurdish policy before the vote as he allies with the staunchly Turkish nationalist MHP, potentially affecting the U.S. partnership with the Syrian Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) in the near term. Once the snap elections are over, however, he would presumably have more room to maneuver regarding this and other hot-button nationalist issues.

WHY WOULD ERDOGAN PUSH FOR EARLY ELECTIONS?

Turkey's next local elections are scheduled for March 2019, eight months before the planned parliamentary and presidential elections. When voting in local elections, Turks tend to give greater consideration to local figures than to national party platforms, so ruling parties often fare poorly compared to their performance in parliamentary polls. For instance, the AKP received 38.3 of the vote in the 2009 local elections, compared to 49.8 percent in the 2011 parliamentary elections. Erdogan may want to save his party from a similar setback in the next round.

One way of doing so would be to bundle local, parliamentary, and presidential elections together in the same month next year. Yet Erdogan may instead decide to hold some or all of these votes much earlier based on a host of other domestic and foreign drivers:

Strong economic growth. Although the July 2016 coup attempt and ensuing state of emergency compromised Erdogan's long track record of increasing Turkey's prosperity, figures for 2017 indicate that the economy grew much faster than predicted, largely fueled by credit-driven consumption, exports, and government infrastructure projects. By year's end, the growth rate reportedly jumped to 7 percent, its highest level since 2011. Erdogan may be eager to ride this strong economic wave while it lasts by holding elections this year rather than next, allowing him and other AKP candidates to take credit for the rosy financial outlook on the campaign trail—and perhaps convince some voters to overlook other troubling issues.

A friendly new election monitoring system. Turkey has held free and fair elections since 1950, and its election monitoring commissions have played an important role in this regard by observing and tallying the vote. Traditionally, members of each party participating in an election have staffed these commissions, thereby counterbalancing each other and ensuring transparency. Last year, however, the AKP and the MHP successfully pushed to change Turkey's election law by allowing the government to appoint most of the monitors. Given the government's current composition, this provision would allow the AKP (and, by extension, Erdogan) to cherry-pick the next commissions, so he may decide to take advantage of the situation by holding early elections.

When Erdogan won a yes vote on Turkey's April 2017 referendum—which, among other things, will allow him to assume executive-style presidential powers following the next national elections—he did so with a slim 51 percent majority. At the time, massive allegations of voter fraud emerged, and while the AKP dismissed them, suspicions lingered among many Turks. The change in commission policy will make electoral oversight even more elusive for opposition parties, potentially giving Erdogan the legal buffer he needs to ensure a "clean" victory if the next elections are as close as the 2017 referendum.

The Jerusalem issue. Although Erdogan has gone to great lengths to establish good rapport with the new U.S. administration, he was quick to criticize President Trump's December decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. After declaring that the city's disposition "is a redline for Muslims," he spearheaded a December 18 UN General Assembly resolution condemning President Trump and the United States.

Given Erdogan's relative silence on the administration's other regional policies (e.g., last year's ban on immigrants and visitors from certain Muslim-majority countries), his strident reaction to the Jerusalem issue may simply be a ploy to fire up the AKP's conservative base ahead of early elections. Erdogan first came to power by championing conservative and political Islamist grievances against the secular political system. These two constituencies, once stigmatized and discriminated against, have taken over the levers of power under his rule and steadily dismantled the secular system. Consequently, there are few remaining grievances big enough to mobilize this AKP base, leaving Erdogan to more or less invent new ones.

Indeed, pro-Erdogan media have gone to great lengths to cast Trump's Jerusalem decision as an injustice against all Muslims, especially Turks. On January 1, the *Daily Sabah* newspaper published a headline that read "Jerusalem decision a test for Muslim leaders, an end to hopes for peace." In short, Erdogan appears willing to exchange a short-term dip in his rapport with Trump in return for a bump among conservative voters who may drive him to definitive victory if early elections are called.

New right-wing challengers. In political terms, Turkey is a right-wing country—the left has held power for a paltry seventeen months since the country's first multiparty elections in 1950. The AKP has been the dominant party on the right for years, and the other traditional right-wing faction, the MHP, has declared its intent to support Erdogan in the next elections.

Even so, the president faces a fresh challenge from the right via the IYI (Good) Party. Meral Aksener, who formerly served as interior minister and deputy speaker of the parliament, recently left MHP to establish IYI as a right-leaning centrist movement. By taking aim at Erdogan's soft right flank, she poses a bigger threat to him than the leftist parties can muster. While polls show IYI hovering at around 10 percent support, Erdogan is well aware that the more time Aksener has to build her base, the more likely she will be able to position herself as a formidable right-wing alternative and peel off some AKP voters. Snap elections could help him nip this new challenger in the bud and keep IYI from meeting the 10 percent electoral threshold required for entry into parliament.

THE MECHANICS OF CALLING SNAP ELECTIONS

There is ample precedent for early elections in Turkey. They occurred more than once in the 1990s, and Erdogan himself called snap parliamentary elections in 2011 to take advantage of the country's economic and political stability at the time.

The April 2017 constitutional changes mandated that parliamentary and presidential elections be held at the same time, and early elections can now be called by either the parliament or the president (though calling early local elections would require an amendment to Article 127 of the constitution). For example, the parliament can move a national election up with a qualified majority of 330 of the 550 total members in the legislature—an easy hurdle given that the AKP and MHP hold 352 seats in total. Erdogan also has the power to call for early elections himself, though he may prefer to go the parliamentary route for appearance's sake.

If the parliament calls for early elections, legislators must then agree on a new date. If Erdogan makes the call, elections are automatically scheduled for the first Sunday sixty days after his announcement. Either way, snap elections would mean an early transition to Turkey's new executive presidential system—another key reason why Erdogan may want to move them up.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S.-TURKISH TIES

If Ankara calls for snap elections, Turkey's position on U.S. cooperation with the YPG would no doubt harden, both to satisfy the MHP's Turkish nationalist base and prevent Aksener from peeling away AKP voters. The MHP is currently polling around 9 percent, just below the 10 percent parliamentary threshold, so partnering with the AKP in early elections would make sense for both parties. As mentioned previously, however, Erdogan would regain his current wiggle room on the YPG issue after the elections. He has used and discarded many allies before, including liberals, Kurdish nationalists, and the Gulen movement, so he would have no qualms about abandoning Bahçeli's faction after winning complete control of the country—particularly if it means better ties with the United States.

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