

# Popularity contest - the implications of Turkey's local elections

Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has taken a keen interest in his party's local election campaign. *Soner Çagaptay* examines the implications for Turkey's domestic politics and foreign policy, and Erdogan's strategy towards the presidency.

## Key Points

- The consolidation of Turkish political parties continued, with the system now having four major parties.
- Erdogan won the local elections convincingly, giving support to his likely August presidential bid.
- Erdogan is likely to try to improve ties with Israel and Cyprus in order to assuage US fears over his bid.

Results from Turkey's 30 March local elections showed the incumbent Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi: AKP) has held onto its seats. According to the Turkish daily newspaper *Hurriyet*, the AKP, which has been running the country since 2002, received 44% of the popular vote. The AKP is a broad right-wing coalition of Islamists, reformist Islamists, conservatives, nationalists, centre-right, and pro-business groups.

The secular leftist opposition Republican Peoples Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi: CHP) gained 26% of the vote, while Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi: MHP) - a right-wing movement - received 18%. The Kurdish Nationalist Peace and Democracy Party (Baris ve Demokrasi Partisi: BDP) entered the elections in a coalition with the Peoples' Democracy Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi: HDP) - a leftist movement the BDP had created to appeal to left-leaning Turks and Kurds in the country's main cities. Together they collected 6.6% of the vote. Their strategy fell apart as the HDP failed to make headway among metropolitan Kurds, garnering, for instance, an average of 3.3% of the vote in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, the country's three largest cities, which all host large Kurdish populations.

There is much speculation that Turkish prime minister and AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan will run in August to become Turkey's first popularly elected president. Following the 2007 constitutional referendum, in August Turks will for the first time elect a president through a direct vote; all previous presidents have been elected by parliament.

## Election impact

An orthodox analysis comparing this year's turnout with the previous 2009 local election results shows that all four major parties of Turkey's political landscape - the AKP, CHP, MHP, and BDP - have increased their support this year. The AKP has increased its votes from 39% to 44%, the CHP from 23% to 26%, the MHP from 16% to 18%, and the BDP from 6% to 6.6%. Therefore, under this conventional analysis, Turkey's decade old process of political consolidation can be viewed as having matured to a four-party system. The centre-right True Path Party (Dogru Yol Partisi: DYP) and Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi: ANAP) and centrist/centre-left Democratic Left Party (Demokratik Sol Parti: DSP), which governed Turkey in the 1980s and 1990s, have effectively become extinct following these elections. The votes of these defunct parties now go to the four top parties, which command 93% of the ballots cast.

However, an unconventional analysis would compare the local election results to general election results because party leaders ran nationwide campaigns in the run-up to the polls, even though Turks only voted for mayors and council members on 30 March. For instance, Erdogan toured the entire country, rallying on behalf of the AKP candidates - and more importantly under the banner of his image as the country's future leader. The opposition ran anti-Erdogan campaigns, using corruption allegations against the prime minister to back their own cause. As a result, the election results can be seen as a vote of confidence on Erdogan and his ruling party, as well as on the opposition.

Comparing the March 2014 local election results with those from the most recent parliamentary election in 2011 reveals a different picture. While support for the AKP dropped from 50% to 44%, the CHP's support has remained nearly the same at 26%, and the BDP's support around 7%. However, the MHP made rapid gains, increasing its support from 13% to 18%. It appears that some voters disappointed by the governing AKP, including over corruption allegations that led to the resignation of three ministers in December 2013, may have switched support to the right-wing MHP. This suggests that the traditional left-right split in Turkish politics is still alive. The "leftist" CHP did not make significant gains from disillusioned AKP voters. Despite the fact that the CHP and MHP leaderships made unofficial election alliances in certain provinces, such as Ankara, at least some CHP or MHP voters did not cross the left-right divide - the AKP won Ankara by a narrow margin. Accordingly, any MHP-CHP effort to field a joint candidate in the August presidential polls will face challenges in uniting all the votes of these two parties under one tent.

## **Shifts and trends in voter behaviour**

Whether using the conventional analysis to conclude that all parties increased their votes, or the unconventional analysis to suggest that the AKP lost some votes and the MHP made some gains, a closer study of the election results also points to new trends along the four-party axis.

Key among these is the significant gains the MHP has made in the regions of Western-Central Black Sea coastal and Inner Aegean-Lakes region. These regions have mixed industrial-agricultural economies and can be considered as 'Middle Turkey', falling between the prosperous Mediterranean, Marmara, and Aegean Sea coastal regions, as well as the poorer central, east, and southeast Anatolian regions. The MHP took between a quarter and a third of the votes in these regions, far exceeding its national average of 18%.

In this regard, an important trend is the huge jump for support for the MHP in a number of provinces in these regions. For instance, and again using the 2011 general elections to compare, the MHP increased its votes by 153% in Samsun, 122% in Sinop, 80% in Zonguldak, and 77% in Bartın among the western-central Black Sea coastal provinces. The party made major headway also in the Inner Aegean-Lakes Region provinces; its vote was up by 110% in Manisa, 90% in Kutahya, 78% in Isparta, 67% in Uşak, and 65% in Afyon.

In addition, the MHP made large gains in conservative-nationalist central and eastern Anatolian provinces, its traditional bastion that it shared with the AKP, stealing disaffected conservative voters from the AKP. In Erzurum for instance, the party increased its votes by 85%, likely reaping benefits from the rift between AKP and the Gülen Movement, an Islamist movement formerly supporting the AKP. The founder of the movement, Fethullah Gülen, was born in Erzurum, and the movement is considered to have a relatively strong following in this province. A political split erupted in late 2013 between Erdoğan and Gülen, a cleric who currently lives in the United States and against whom extradition proceedings are to be launched, according to local media quoting Erdoğan on 29 April. Gülen's supporters had previously cast their ballots for the AKP, but many refused to vote for the ruling party, instead opting for the other right-wing parties. Accordingly, in Erzurum support for the MHP went from 13% in 2011 to 25% in 2014. Conversely, the AKP's support declined from 70% to 54%.

Unlike the MHP, which increased its votes by more than 30% in 49 of the 81 Turkish provinces, the AKP's vote has mostly stagnated, making only slight gains and then only in a few provinces. A trend appears to be clear: the end of Turkey's traditional parties has helped the MHP more than the AKP. The MHP has become the party of choice for the remnants of Turkey's once powerful centre-right and centrist movements.

The MHP has grown in 'Middle Turkey' provinces, bolstering its claim to represent the country's political and socio-economic middle, while the AKP lost relative popularity in the same area. For instance, support for the AKP dropped by 21% in Manisa, 20% in Isparta, and 19% in Afyon, 17% in Kutahya, and 16% in Burdur, all Inner Aegean-Lakes regions and provinces.

Meanwhile, the left-wing CHP made its most significant gains in the country's industrial and wealthy provinces in the northwest, signalling that the future of this party lies in its urban appeal. In Bolu, Eskisehir, and Kocaeli, three of the country's most developed and wealthy provinces, the CHP increased its votes by 19%, 15%, and 15%, respectively. In Istanbul, the party made gains as well,

increasing its votes by 18%, while in nearby Marmara Sea provinces, Yalova and Bursa, support for the party increased by nearly 9% and 8% respectively. Notably, the CHP has made most of its gains in a cluster of provinces that could be considered as 'Greater Istanbul' namely those in the eastern Marmara littoral: provinces such as Bursa, Yalova, and Kocaeli, as well as nearby Bolu and Eskisehir, which are part of Istanbul's economic area.

Other than the Greater Istanbul region, the CHP made meaningful gains only in a handful of provinces, such as the industrial province of Gaziantep, where the party increased its votes by 6%. In addition to the urban nature of Gaziantep, disenchantment with the AKP's Syria policy in this province along the Syrian border might have helped the CHP's relative rise there. Across the rest of the country, the CHP vote has stagnated; the party made gains of more than 5% in only 11 of the 81 Turkish provinces, while in 51 provinces it lost support by more than 10%.

However, the AKP remains the predominant party in Turkey. The party won the overall vote in 61 of the 81 Turkish provinces. The two main opposition groups, the CHP and the MHP, collectively have as many votes as the AKP. Yet, the CHP won the popular vote in eight provinces and MHP in two provinces. The BDP has solidified its base winning the popular vote in 10 southeast Anatolian provinces. The BDP is a small player but its voice counts where it has won: the BDP is the only party that won any province by an overwhelming majority nearly reaching 70%. In Hakkari, for instance, the party received 69% support, the highest percentage of votes cast for any party on a provincial basis on 30 March.

## Erdogan's election strategy

The anatomy of the Turkish electorate and the popularity of the AKP suggest that the Kurdish vote is powerful enough that it could affect the outcome of the presidential elections in August. In order to be elected, Erdogan needs to amass at least 50% of the overall vote. To achieve that, the Kurdish vote is pivotal. Should Erdogan secure Kurdish nationalist votes from the BDP, he could be potentially elected as the country's next president in the first round. Erdogan has been an outlier among Turkish leaders for his record of good relations with and support for the Kurds. Although this may not be enough to win over all BDP voters, Erdogan's trump card could be an offer of devolving some powers to Kurdish provinces, for example, a limited amount of autonomy in exchange for Kurdish votes in August.

In addition to this potential short-term manoeuvre, Erdogan's long-term political strategy has two elements: his track record on the economy since 2002, and his personal popularity. This has delivered him three consecutive election victories in 2002, 2007, and 2011.

Turkey's economy has grown because the AKP has attracted international investors by ensuring economic and political stability. Although some analysts suggested the protests during 2013 over the construction of a shopping centre on Gezi Park, one of the few green spaces in Istanbul, would dent Turkey's investment worthiness, GDP grew by 4.4% in 2013 (an exception in Europe).

Another important factor for Erdogan's popularity is, ironically, his image as an 'authoritarian underdog'. His ability to challenge and cut down those who oppose him is well received by core AKP voters. Erdogan portrays himself as a political victim who needs to crack down harshly on 'conspirators' who plot to undermine his authority. For example in a speech to parliament on 25 February, he blamed for his troubles conspiracies by financiers, government critics, the media, an "international lobby", a "war lobby", and a "preacher's lobby", a reference to Gülen. Erdogan has created a powerful cult of personality with his political strategy of self-victimisation and demonisation of the opposition, combined with an undeniable economic success story. The local election results seem to confirm that his strategy works, preparing the Turkish prime minister for a likely presidential run in August.

Erdogan can take three possible paths. The first is to seek the presidency, after having transformed it into an office with executive powers by revising the constitution. Currently, Turkey's parliamentary democratic system ascribes only limited power to the presidency. This path, which requires both a parliamentary vote and a referendum, is a tall order for Erdogan.

The second option is to retain the status quo, remaining as prime minister and having another AKP member run for president. This would require revising the AKP's internal charter that prohibits elected party officials from holding the same office for more than three terms (which Erdogan would violate should he run for prime minister again). However, there is no constitutional bar. In this scenario,

current Turkish president Abdullah Gül could run for the presidency again. This could be a less polarising presidential race than would be the case if Erdogan were running, as Gül has an appeal that reaches beyond party lines. Nonetheless, this is the least desirable option for Erdogan, who is eager to take the seat once filled by Kemal Ataturk, modern Turkey's first president, and to do so via popular vote. He is likely to view the local election results as a sign that his goal is within reach.

The third and most likely scenario for Erdogan is to run for president using the existing system, with another AKP figure running for prime minister. In this scenario, the power of the prime minister would be formally maintained, but a future president Erdogan would take executive decisions behind the scenes. This scenario is similar to the Russian model under Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev.

## **Turkish foreign policy**

The new four-party alignment in the country does not change the composition of the parliament or government. Its impact on Turkish politics is limited to the extent that it shapes Erdogan's popularity and presidential agenda.

With Erdogan's eyes set on the August presidential elections, Turkey's foreign policy will also be subservient to Erdogan's political plans. The Turkish leader will take the necessary steps to ensure that problems in Turkey's 'neighbourhood', such as Syria, do not have an impact on the country's economic stability, hence preventing them from undermining his electoral goals. Erdogan is unlikely to change his government's policy over Syria, despite claims that this is making him unpopular, given his latest electoral victory. More likely is that Erdogan will seek to whip up nationalist sentiment over issues such as Syrian artillery shells falling on Turkish territory, and over border incidents. Moreover, Erdogan is likely to try to show that he takes Islamist extremism seriously by retaliating strongly to any perceived provocation by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

At the same time, he will take advantage of regional opportunities, such as the Cyprus unification talks, normalisation with Israel, and co-operation with the Kurds, to launch a charm offensive on the Turkish electorate. This strategy would also help boost his stature in Washington, alleviating concerns about his polarising political tactics at home during the campaign season.

## **Israel and Cyprus**

Oil and gas finds in the eastern Mediterranean have motivated talks between Turkey and Israel on the normalization of their bilateral ties. Turkey's hydrocarbon needs and Israel's fuel export needs will pull the two towards each other. The normalisation of Turkish-Israeli ties will move forward as long as the issue does not become overly politicised during the Turkish elections. Turkey needs to diversify its energy sources to become less dependent on Russia and Iran from which Turkey imports three quarters of its natural gas and oil. Therefore, Israeli gas will assist Turkey's energy diversification and, in return, Turkey is the closest viable market to Israel that has a substantive energy demand.

In addition, Turkey's thirst for natural gas will not only speed the normalisation process with Israel, but will also cause Turkey to soften its policy towards the Greek Cypriots, who have discovered some natural gas and are working with Israel to export it. This puts the eventual unification of Cyprus back on the table, even if this remains a far-fetched scenario for the time being.

Cyprus talks may not cost Erdogan much domestically if they do not ultimately succeed. Even with a natural gas deal in the background, full normalisation of ties between Turkey and Israel may well only take place after the August presidential elections. However, Erdogan has an increasingly negative image among Washington's policymakers, in Congress, and in the US administration, as an "authoritarian leader". He is therefore likely to build expectations for increased prospects of normalisation even before the polls. Together with his positive attitude on Cyprus talks and the Kurds, Erdogan's image in Washington is likely to ultimately improve.

## **Syria, Kurds, and the US**

Since 2011, Turkey has followed a policy of regime change in Syria, supporting and arming the rebels against the government of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. So far, this policy has failed to deliver results. Additionally, Turkey now faces a weak state in Syria. Ankara's



Syria policy has exposed Turkey to severe threats from Syria, namely an Assad regime that will not forgive Ankara for its attempt to oust Assad, and Al-Qaeda-aligned jihadist groups that are likely to bite the hand that feeds them. Previously, the Assad regime had used proxies, including the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan: PKK) in the 1990s, to conduct attacks in Turkey.

Turkey is now in peace talks with the PKK as part of Erdogan's agenda of reaching out to the Kurds to secure their votes for the 30 March poll but also, potentially, in the August presidential elections. In January 2014, the PKK's Syrian branch, the Party for Democratic Unity (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat: PYD) declared autonomy in three areas of Syria on the border with Turkey. The PYD has, for the time being, not threatened Turkey.

The evolution of the Syrian conflict has therefore made Turkey vulnerable to Al-Qaeda and Assad proxies. Ankara does not have the hard power, whether reliable proxies, intelligence assets on the ground, or advanced weaponry (such as unmanned aerial vehicles or missile defence systems) to contain the threats from Syria. This is why Erdogan cannot afford to move away from NATO or Washington, especially in an election season.

## Conclusion

In Turkey's new four-party system, the AKP remains the dominant party. The governing party has an especially strong appeal in rural Turkey, including central and eastern Anatolian regions, and among the urban working and lower-middle classes that carried it to power. This support is likely to give Erdogan the numbers he needs to win the August presidential election. His path will be especially easy if he secures the Kurdish nationalist vote.

The main opposition CHP seems to be building an appeal to urban voters, especially those clustered in wealthy Turkish provinces around Istanbul. The MHP has emerged as 'party of the middle', making gains from disenchanted AKP supporters, centrist/centre-right voters, as well as in the middle-income provinces of the country. The BDP is crucial, despite being the smallest of the four parties with less than 7% support, mostly in the southeast. This is in part because the Turkish electorate is split between AKP supporters and opponents, and Kurdish nationalist votes have the potential to swing the outcome of the August presidential elections. As such, Erdogan will be hard-pressed to revive the peace talks that were announced in 2012. His latest electoral success gives him the mandate to do so and to make the required concessions to the Kurds.

Against a background of a new four-party system, Erdogan will need to capture Kurdish nationalist votes to be elected president in August. This suggests Erdogan will adopt a malleable attitude towards the Kurds in Turkey and the region until the polls. At the same time, Erdogan will identify new domestic opponents, such as the country's constitutional court, which has a prerogative to exercise checks and balances against the government, as well as liberals, and the Gülen movement to boost his popularity as an underdog, while also suggesting that his opponents are out to undermine him and those who vote for him. This strategy will help Erdogan boost his popularity.

The US confrontation with Russia over Ukraine and Crimea makes Turkey even more important to Washington. Moreover, Erdogan is likely to make some gestures towards improving relations with Israel, for Turkey's own economic reasons and to boost his presidential bid. As such, Erdogan's 'charm offensive' on Cyprus, Israel, and the Kurds will help him restore his image in Washington.

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