



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Turkey: Election Time Again

by Burak Bekdil

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 867, June 17, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: On June 24, Turkey will hold its sixth election in four years. The Turks will choose between augmenting what is practically one-man rule based on Islamist politics and returning to a regime based on the separation of legislative, executive, and judicial powers.

Turkey's Islamist strongman, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has not lost a single election since his Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in November 2002. On June 24, the Turks will go to the ballot box for the sixth time in four years. Because the people show signs of weariness over a plummeting national currency and slowing economy, and at a time when an opposition figure is gaining popularity, Election 2018 has the potential to be a bigger-than-expected challenge to a politician who has remained unchallenged for the past 16 years.

Election timetable

In a referendum on April 16, 2017, the Turks narrowly voted in favor of landmark constitutional amendments that gave the country's president almost limitless powers without effective checks and balances. Under the changes, the president would be head of state, head of government, and head of the ruling party, all at the same time. He would be able to rule by decree. Turkey would hold presidential and parliamentary elections in November 2019.

But in a surprise move, Erdoğan decided to call for a snap election, possibly fearing the ballot-box implications of the plunging economy. Waiting until November 2019 entails the risk that economic management will have spiraled completely out of control by then.

The cast

Erdoğan and his AKP have allied with a nationalist party (the Nationalist Movement Party, or MHP), and a splinter nationalist-conservative party (the Grand Unity Party, or BBP), hoping to form a solid right-wing bloc to appeal to an increasingly nationalist society. This coalition is known as the Alliance of the People.

The opposition, led by the social democrat Republican People's Party (CHP), quickly put together a rival alliance, the Alliance of the Nation. This brings together a center-right newcomer (the IYI Party, or the Good Party), and a splinter conservative party (Felicity, or SP).

The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democracy Party (HDP) has not joined either alliance. The election will thus see competition among three blocs: the People, the Nation, and the Kurds.

An unfair race

The government bloc is using rich state resources to run its campaign. It has announced several investment incentives, tax breaks, tax reductions, subsidies, mega-projects, and new jobs to consolidate votes. Operation Olive Branch, the Turkish military's incursion into northwest Syria, and the capture of a Kurdish enclave there may bring in extra votes to the government from nationalist constituencies, as opinion polls have found that nearly 85% of Turks supported the military campaign that began on January 20. Erdoğan's government also makes systematic use of a massive propaganda machine, as it controls nearly 90% of the media. For instance, state broadcaster TRT has allocated 117 minutes to Erdoğan's campaign against a mere 16 minutes allotted to the campaign of his main presidential rival, Muharrem Ince.

On the negative side, the Turkish lira fell by more than 17% between the beginning of the year and May 23 amid concerns about the Central Bank's inability to rein in double-digit inflation. According to Remres, a pollster, 67.8% of Turks expect the economy to be in worse shape in the future.

None of that will matter if, as the opposition fears, there is ballot box fraud on June 24. European observers suspected that up to 2.5 million votes may have been rigged in the April 2017 referendum.

With or without vote-rigging, Remres found that 60.8 percent of Turks think Election 2018 will not be a fair race.

Presidential candidates

Five candidates will race against Erdoğan in the first round of the vote on June 24. They are: CHP's Muharrem Ince, IYI's Meral Akşener, SP's Temel Karamollaoğulları, HDP's Selahattin Demirtaş (who is running his campaign

from his prison cell), and Doğu Perinçek, an eccentric former Maoist who is now a leftist-nationalist. The successful candidate should win 50% plus one vote in the first round. Most polls expect Erdoğan to fail to win in the first round. They estimate the first-round ranking to be in this order: Erdoğan, Ince, Akşener, and Demirtaş. Should that occur, Erdoğan will face Ince in the second round, with İYİ and SP most likely uniting behind the opposition candidate. That would make Demirtaş's Kurdish voters the kingmaker.

Scenarios

There are four post-election possibilities:

- 1- Erdoğan wins the presidency and AKP wins a parliamentary majority
- 2- Erdoğan wins, but AKP loses a parliamentary majority
- 3- Erdoğan loses the presidency but his AKP wins a parliamentary majority
- 4- Erdoğan and AKP both lose

The fourth option is the least likely, and few observers view the third as likely either. The hot bet is either 1 or 2. If, however, option 4 materializes, Turkey will go through a painful period of regime change, with street violence and a near civil war emerging as potential dangers in a perilously polarized society. Erdoğan fans, who often gather in violent groups, would not believe the vote count had been fair (even if it was) and would take to the streets to clash with the "traitors" who went against their "great leader."

The first option would mean simply business as usual: Turkey descends further into Islamist one-man rule, and the nation – now further polarized along secular and conservative lines – turns less manageable. The second option would be the most interesting: it would not please Erdoğan and may leave his hands tied. In theory, Erdoğan could rule by decree, but an opposition-majority parliament might always pass laws nullifying his decrees (as the constitution states). Erdoğan would in that case be forced to abolish parliament (and his office) and call for early elections to be held within a minimum 90 days. The Turks could find themselves at the ballot box once again later this year.

The 'Gaza factor'

Trouble in Gaza – indeed, any Israel-related conflict, like the Israeli-Lebanese war in 2006 – has always benefited Erdoğan, who is Turkey's anti-Zionist, pro-Hamas strongman. Erdoğan is invariably the quickest and fiercest Turkish politician to rush to bash Israel every time the Arab-Israeli dispute turns violent. His election rallies were filled with party loyalists who waved Palestinian along with Turkish flags.

Erdoğan has extensively abused the Turks' pro-Palestinian sentiment and turned it into votes. It took the opposition more than a decade to discover the

“Palestinian ammunition” and challenge Erdoğan’s abuse. Once again, as in 2014, the news of “our Muslim brothers dying with Jewish bullets” came ahead of a Turkish presidential election, with Erdoğan calling Israel an apartheid state and a terror state, labelling the deaths of 60 Gazans “genocide,” calling for an emergency meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and hastily putting together a public rally “in solidarity with our Palestinian brothers.”

But this time, he lost his monopoly power over general anti-Israeli sentiment in the country when the opposition bloc enthusiastically took up that rhetoric, sometimes even surpassing it. The opposition parties joined a non-partisan parliamentary statement that condemned “Israeli violence in Gaza.” CHP even proposed that the government downgrade its diplomatic ties with the Jewish state and abolish the reconciliation accord of December 2016. When the Turkish government decided to temporarily recall Ambassador Kemal Ökem, the CHP said that was not enough – he should be recalled indefinitely.

During his campaign, Erdoğan has promised to further consolidate power in a regime based on unity of powers (legislative, executive, and judicial). Ince promises to undo Erdoğan’s executive presidential system by returning to the separation of powers. With the April 2017 referendum, the Turks decided to give away their democracy. Now, just over a year later, they may decide to take it back.

Burak Bekdil is an Ankara-based columnist. He regularly writes for the Gatestone Institute and Defense News and is a fellow at the Middle East Forum. He is also a founder of, and associate editor at, the Ankara-based think tank Sigma.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family