

BULLETIN

No. 63 (280) • June 10, 2011 • © PISM

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The Elections in Turkey. The Consequences for its Domestic and Foreign Policy

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The general election to the Turkish parliament will be held on 12 June. Projections indicate that the moderate Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) will win for the third time in a row. It can count on support of between 42% and 48% of voters. Probably after the elections, the AKP will continue the transformation of the political system in Turkey. It is expected that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will prepare a new constitution that would alter the country's political system from a parliamentary one to a presidential system. It also is assumed that the AKP's foreign policy will continue to strive for integration with the European Union, although it is unlikely to accelerate. In foreign policy, Turkey also will continue its "soft power" strategy with the countries of the region and seek to play an increasing role in the Middle East.

The electoral success of the AKP can be contributed to the economic development of Turkey. Under the AKP's leadership, Turkey has gone through an economic boom: It already is the world's 16th-largest economy, GDP increased by 8.9% in 2010, inflation is falling, foreign investments are breaking records, energy and food prices are stable and the Turkish currency, the lira, is strong. During the time the AKP has been in power, the internal political situation has stabilized and the threat of military coup has been minimal. The country also likes the idea of the policy led by Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu of "zero problems with neighbours," which has made Turkey a more and more important country in the region. A sharp rhetoric against Israel also can bring in a lot of supporters.

It will be hard to repeat the success of the 2007 election in the southeastern part of Turkey, which is inhabited largely by the Kurdish minority. The slow pace of democratization does not meet the expectations of the Kurdish population. The Prime Minister's nationalistic rhetoric during the election campaign also may have negative effects among Kurds. The AKP may lose the votes of some liberals who have stopped believing in the democratic intentions of the Prime Minister.

The Consequences of the Elections in Turkey for its Internal Policy. Especially during its first term (2002-2007), the AKP carried out many democratic changes under pressure from the European Union. Kurds were allowed to use their language and open schools. Public debate about the issue of the massacre of Armenians in the early 20th century has increased. Despite these changes it still is difficult to recognize Turkey as a democratic country, as confirmed by a recent European Commission report. The freedom of expression is very questionable, with 57 journalists imprisoned. Many of them are accused of belonging to a secret organization, Ergenekon, the aim of which is to overthrow the government. Freedom of expression also is restricted in the mass media, especially on the Internet where a lot of pages have been blocked. The anxiety levels of human-rights defenders were raised by ongoing public leaks over the last several years about private conversation among representatives of the army, journalists and opposition politicians. According to the opposition, the AKP and police, with which AKP supporter imam-philosopher Fethullah Gülen has significant influence, are behind the leaks. However, there is no evidence that the AKP and Gülen were directly involved in the leaks.

It is believed that after the election, the Prime Minister will continue to refer to Islamic values with regard to social issues. He is not expected to change his position on media restrictions. It is probable that the AKP will force through another controversial law that could limit freedom of expression in Turkey. However, these changes could result in opposition demonstrations. On interior issues,

the Prime Minister will not yield on the Kurdish issue. He claims that the Kurdish problem has been solved. In economic matters, he will remain an advocate of a free market economy. It cannot be feared that Turkey will impose strict Islamic law because doing so would cause strong opposition not only among supporters of a secular state, but also among voters for the AKP.

It is believed that after the elections, the Prime Minister will seek to push through a new constitution in parliament that increases presidential powers. According to the opposition, the Prime Minister would like to take the place of current President Abdullah Gül after Gül's term ends and then hold the office for some time. The AKP will need 330 of 550 seats in parliament to push through a draft constitution without the support of the opposition and to send the application directly to a referendum. Turkey has the highest parliamentary electoral threshold in Europe—10 percent—and the AKP should benefit as a result. Since that threshold may be difficult for the right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) to surpass, it would allow the AKP to take more seats in parliament.

The Consequences of the Elections in Turkey for its Foreign Policy. After the election, the main objective of the foreign policy of Turkey will remain membership in the European Union. But it is not certain whether the AKP will accelerate the work to allow better negotiations of the conditions and quickly close this negotiating chapter. The moot point in negotiations remains the problem of Cyprus. Concessions to Turkey in this respect seem unlikely since there are many politicians in the AKP ranks who express nationalistic views and oppose the idea of the reunification of Cyprus. Any agreement on concessions in this matter may expose the AKP to a loss of its electorate, who claim that the unification of Cyprus will lead to the take-over of control of the island by Greek Cypriots.

It also is thought that Turkey will have a more active and independent foreign policy, and, in some cases, may even be in conflict with the interests of the United States. It will aspire to a leadership role in the Middle East. Turkey will restrict its activities in the NATO framework, which could harm its interests in the Middle East and the Maghreb, the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Evidence for this can be seen in the recent conflict in Libya in which Turkey opposed NATO intervention in the country. However, Turkish foreign policy is unlikely to be contrary to the interests of the European Union. Turkey may assist in maintaining a stable situation in countries in North Africa and the Middle East.

Conclusions. During its last nine years in power, the AKP has been under pressure from the European Union and has carried out a package of democratic reforms in Turkey. Thanks to those reforms, the country has become by far the most democratic in the region. But over the past few years, democratic reforms have slowed or reversed course. Restrictions on freedom of expression and arrests of members of the opposition raise many doubts. After the election, the Prime Minister should continue the transformation of the political system, which cannot lead to simple progress in the democratization process. It seems that Turkey's Prime Minister will seek to build a "Muslim model of democracy," which will be based only partly on democratic values. However, an attempt to carry out this model may lead to an increase in social divisions, which already are very high in Turkey. This also confirms that the election campaign will be extremely rough. In the context of the upcoming Polish presidency, it is worth using the process of Turkey's accession negotiations to demonstrate to Turkish politicians the benefits of continuing democratic reforms.