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The Justice and Development Party in the Turkish Elections:

A Limited Triumph

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The success by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in gaining more votes than in the previous elections, as well as the latest poll conducted by the Pew Institute charting the Turkish public's optimism about the country's future, indicates that the current elections were a vote of confidence in Erdoğan. The Turks trust he will be able to continue to promote Turkey's economy, develop its infrastructures, and – to the displeasure of some but to the joy of many – allow a greater place for religion in the daily life and politics of Turkey. Even many of those who voted for opposition parties are secretly happy that Erdoğan will continue to serve as prime minister and that governmental stability will be maintained. Voting for the opposition parties was, for many, not an attempt to topple Erdoğan but only to rein in his power.

The results of the elections in Turkey show that more than in the past, votes were concentrated among the large political parties, so that all have reason to be pleased. The percentage of votes for the ruling party, the AKP, rose somewhat (from almost 47 percent in the 2007 elections to almost 50 percent) and the percentage of votes for the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), also grew (from almost 21 percent to 26 percent). While the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the second largest opposition party, suffered a slight decline (from about 14 percent to 13 percent), it did manage to pass the high Turkish threshold (10 percent) for representation in parliament.

A more in-depth examination, however, reveals a certain disappointment in the AKP, because despite the increase in its percentage of votes it lost a number of seats in parliament (from 331 of the 550 seats in the 2007 elections to 326 seats in 2011) due to the particularities of the Turkish electoral system. The CHP won 135 seats, the MHP – 53 seats, and independent candidates (all of Kurdish origin) – 36 seats. This means that the AKP will have to join forces with at least one of the opposition parties if it wants to adopt a new constitution as it promised during the election campaign. Absent a two-thirds majority, the parliament cannot pass a new constitution; in order to put such a proposal to

a referendum, at least 330 votes are necessary. To be sure, there is far reaching agreement within the opposition that Turkey indeed needs a new constitution, and it seems appropriate that a new constitution be enacted on the basis of a broad parliamentary consensus and a national referendum. However, the opposition is opposed to one of the central reforms proposed by Erdoğan in the new constitution – changing the form of government in Turkey to a presidential one. Erdoğan is interested in this change because party regulations dictate that this is the last term he can serve as prime minister. If the AKP succeeds in clearing the parliamentary hurdle, its chances of passing a new constitution by referendum are good. For example, the previous referendum on reforms in the constitution, which took place in September 2010, passed with a 58 percent majority, i.e., a higher percentage of votes that the AKP won in previous and in recent elections.

The Turkish elections focused primarily on internal issues, but it seems that for now foreign affairs challenges will figure most prominently on the new government's agenda. The revolutions in the Islamic world are, at least in the short term, diametrically opposed to the Turkish vision of promoting stability in the Middle East for the sake of economic prosperity. The unrest and its regional aftershocks will necessarily demand a period of reorganization, which by definition is a sensitive time prone to more than usual violence and thus susceptible to economic slowdowns. The “Arab spring,” which has already destabilized several regimes in the Middle East, especially that of Bashar al-Asad in Syria, has put Turkey in an uncomfortable position. The Turks are very worried about the ongoing Syrian instability and the newly-created refugee problem. While the Turks have a shelf plan for establishing a buffer zone within Syria or on the Turkish-Syrian border where the refugees are already beginning to mass, the exodus is nonetheless expected to create a security and economic burden on Turkey. This is not a problem the Turks cannot handle or one that would necessarily lead to instability in Turkey, but it will affect the areas that are already suffering from a weak economic base and security problems, i.e., the southeastern part of the country.

Furthermore, the expected departure of the next flotilla to the Gaza Strip and the forthcoming publication of the findings of the UN committee to investigate the events of the previous one are liable to develop into another crisis with Israel. One may assume that Turkey is not interested in such a crisis, as the region is already unstable enough and Turkish-Israeli relations are in any case at a nadir. While most Turks support the government position, whereby Israel must apologize for the flotilla events and pay damages, it was possible during the election campaign to hear criticism of the government's handling of the flotilla from the Republican People's Party. Also, judging by the election results, it does not seem that the flotilla events brought many new voters to Erdoğan's side. The fruits of American efforts to apply pressure on Turkey to stop the second flotilla from sailing were apparent in a June 7 statement made by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu to the effect that it is necessary to wait and see how the

opening of the Rafah crossing with Egypt will affect the situation in the Gaza Strip before dispatching another flotilla. In general, one could say that the “Arab spring” has generated a certain narrowing of the gap between Turkey and the United States. Indeed, the two nations are now conducting frequent – at times even daily – consultations on developments in the region.

The Turkish election results, then, symbolize continuity rather than change of the fundamental parameters of the Turkish ruling system. While they represent another victory for the ruling party, they are not the stunning triumph the AKP had hoped for. Moreover, it is the “Arab spring,” which is already prompting Turkey to conduct a more cautious policy than in the past and with greater coordination with the United States, that at least in the near future will have the more profound effect on Turkish foreign affairs.

