



UNDERSTANDING TURKEY'S 2011 GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS

By Gerald Robbins

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Now that the results are known from Turkey's June 12 general election, it is an appropriate time to discern this strategically important nation's state of affairs. Turkey-watching is never an easy matter, especially given the current government's fluctuating ways which confound many analysts. Nearly a decade has passed since the Justice and Development came to power with its heavily-inspired Islamist thinking. Detractors see the AKP's methodology as a stealth jihad that's gradually eroding the country's secularist bearings. Conversely, AKP's proponents applaud the various reforms which the party has enacted, ostensibly projecting it as a "bridge" between Western and Muslim civilizations. Whatever the case may be, the Turkish post-electoral environment is at a critical crossroad with far-reaching implications for its society and beyond.

The election was essentially a foregone conclusion. The main issue wasn't whether the AKP would win, but by how much. Such a tacit acknowledgement was aptly reflected in secularist newspapers and other opposition outlets. Columnists were noticeably subdued in their criticisms of AKP programs and their leader, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. While part of this reticence was due to a growing governmental crackdown against journalists questioning Mr. Erdogan's motives (thereby causing deep concern about AKP's commitment to democracy), the general population wasn't afflicted by an immediate problem or crisis. Compared to its anemic Western counterparts, the Turkish economy had expanded by 8.9 percent in 2010, reflecting a near-decade of strong growth since the AKP assumed control in 2002. Among G-20 countries, only China has grown at a faster pace. This sustained economic boom provides Turkish citizenry with a sense of confidence both at home and abroad towards their Muslim brethren. Additionally, considering that Turkey's per capita income has almost tripled during Erdogan's tenure, it's not hard to realize why AKP captured 50 percent of the vote and once again rules without having to form a coalition government.

However, dominating the popular vote didn't automatically translate into a political mandate. Prime Minister Erdogan's campaign aim was to secure a two thirds majority or 367 of the 550 seats in the Turkish *Meclis* (assembly). Instead AKP won 326 seats, which was five less than what it had in the previous parliament. While the result still gave Mr. Erdogan an absolute majority, it prevented him from having the ability to rule by decree. Unhindered, the AKP could have changed Turkey's constitution to fit their philosophical outlook. It is unanimously agreed across Turkey's political spectrum that a new doctrine needs to replace the existing version, which had been installed by the military following its 1980 coup d'etat. A constitutional referendum incorporating several philosophical viewpoints besides AKP's perspective is now likely. Taking heed of the electoral result, Mr. Erdogan stated "the people gave us a message to build the new constitution through consensus and negotiation."

AKP's tempered victory wasn't due to a noticeable growth in secularist support. Secularism's standard bearer, the Republican Peoples Party (CHP), minimally improved upon their prior 2007 general election performance. Despite new leadership and a publicized shift from etatist ideology to Europhilic Social Democracy, the CHP was able to garner only 26 percent of the total vote. Many political observers were disappointed by the result, expecting the party which was established by Kemal Ataturk, Turkey's founding father, to get around 30% of the ballots cast. Furthermore, CHP's national appeal continued to deteriorate. Save for the Izmir region and European Turkey, nearly all of the Anatolian peninsula (except the Kurdish-dominated Southeast) went AKP. Once solid CHP strongholds along the Turkish Mediterranean and Aegean coasts became Justice and Development territory.

Several explanations are given for the CHP's decline, ranging from archaic programs to weak leadership. Kemal Kilicdaroglu, CHP's current chairman, is trying to transform Ataturk's party from what the Financial Times characterizes as "shrine worshippers with a lazy sense of entitlement to power" into "a viable social democratic party." However, there are noticeable

fissures within the CHP's hierarchy regarding its post-election strategy. Unless this dissension is effectively contained, CHP risks further marginalization.

What stopped Erdogan and the AKP from completely controlling the political process were the other parties that hurdled over the ten percent barrier for parliamentary representation. The far right National Action Party (MHP) and the Kurdish-oriented Peace and Development Party (BDP) couldn't be more disparate in ideological outlook, yet they will likely play pivotal roles in Turkey's political future. Regarding MHP, their results were surprising. A sex scandal involving several senior party officials was seen as the death knell for MHP's electoral fortunes. There was widespread speculation that the party's power base would switch allegiance to the AKP, effectively handing Mr. Erdogan a two-thirds majority to govern as he pleased. However, the anticipated defection didn't occur: MHP's 13 percent tally hardly shrank from its 14 percent performance in the 2007 general election.

Whereas MHP had been tainted by scandal, the BDP was mired in controversy. Its platform advocating greater Kurdish rights and autonomy within a highly centralized Turkey is anathema throughout the political landscape. The issue is generally kept at arm's length by the other parties, namely due to suspicions that any Kurdish polity is a front for separatism. Add to this wariness an ongoing insurrection that has claimed 40,000 lives since the 1980's and any Kurdish-based entity is barely tolerated within the Turkish Parliament.

Procedural restrictions compelled the BDP to run its candidates as independents. Thirty six deputies were elected this way and will now form a Kurdish bloc in the *Meclis*. (Six of these nominees are currently in jail.) This incoming group poses a formidable challenge for Ankara to negotiate an overall solution with. The delegation has doubled its legislative presence from the last assembly and will likely be more forceful in demanding greater autonomy. A recent surge of Kurdish unrest throughout Turkey will likely intensify if the Erdogan government mishandles its dealings with the BDP.

Initial indications are not promising. At the time of this writing, Hatip Dicle, a newly elected BDP deputy, has been prevented from entering Parliament due to accusations of belonging to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) terrorist organization. Mr. Dicle is one of the six imprisoned individuals who are part of the BDP's incoming contingent, and their fates are likely subject to the same decision. An AKP candidate was chosen to fill Mr. Dicle's seat, provoking a BDP boycott of the newly elected *Meclis* and an apparent political deadlock.

The CHP faces a similar situation. Two of its recently elected deputies sit in prison on charges of belonging to an organization (the controversial Ergenekon scandal) that conspired to overthrow the AKP government. A court ruling decided against allowing them out of jail to be sworn in as lawmakers. Both the CHP and BDP are concerned that these judgments are a ploy by the AKP to reach the necessary number of seats for governing by fiat. The two parties advocate for a solution that's similar to what freed Mr. Erdogan from prison shortly before he became Prime Minister. "Regardless of whether the case they are on trial for is Ergenekon or anything else, they have been elected democratically," an independent deputy commented.

There are other matters besides legislative gamesmanship that the AKP needs to focus upon. Various signs indicate that economic difficulties lie ahead. While Turkey's overall performance has been impressive amid present international circumstances, its current account deficit is ballooning and will likely reach 8% of the nation's GDP this year. In April alone, the deficit figure widened to \$7.7 billion from \$4.4 billion in the same month a year ago. Trade-wise, the first four months of 2011 saw a 44 percent increase in imports, while exports grew only 21 percent. As for unemployment, Turkey's 10.7 percent figure is nominally higher than the EU's 9.6 percent average. Particularly troubling is the 19.3 percent jobless rate among Turkish youth. Considering that the nation's median age is 28 years old, the government needs to immediately address this statistic.

Those familiar with recent Turkish history know this is a potentially dangerous brew for political instability. Just a decade ago, Turkey was in a deep financial crisis and beholden to the IMF for assistance. It has successfully emerged from that period, yet another threat currently lingers on the horizon. During the election period, Prime Minister Erdogan spoke of zero interest rates and a tax amnesty to keep the economy growing. These were overly simplistic solutions, reflecting campaign rhetoric instead of reasonable thought. There's no longer a need to curry favor with the electorate, so tougher, albeit unpopular measures need to be enacted. One area where the reins can be tightened is consumer credit. Low lending rates are a contributing factor to the current trade and account deficits. Curbing politically envisioned pork barrel projects (i.e., a canal system for Istanbul intended to bypass the heavily trafficked Bosphorus Straits) would also help.

Another ominous development is the deteriorating situation in next-door Syria. What's transpiring across the border is a reprimand of Prime Minister Erdogan's regional outlook. Syria has been the fulcrum of the AKP's "zero problems" initiative, a policy whose primary aim is improving Turkey's relations with the Arab world. It has opened new markets for Turkish products and counterbalances an overdependence on ties with Europe.

This outreach also satisfies the AKP's Islamist sentiments. The closer rapport with fellow Muslims has been to Israel's detriment, which prior to the AKP's tenure, enjoyed good relations with Turkey. Syria is the main benefactor of this

estrangement, establishing a partnership with Turkey that has removed trade barriers, visa restrictions and produced numerous bilateral trade agreements. Both nations have further expanded their cooperation into the military realm, signing a defense cooperation treaty that raises eyebrows throughout Western military circles.

The embraces and words of fraternity have changed with the coming of the Arab Spring. When it came knocking on Syria's door, Prime Minister Erdogan believed that Turkish democracy would serve as the solution to their neighbors woes and frustrations. He's badly miscalculated—Syrian President Bashar Assad has no interest in adopting Turkey's system of governance or other democratic models. Totalitarian rule and suppression is what Assad knows best, a family enterprise that's none of Ankara's business. His relationship with Turkey is for strategic and economic purposes only.

As a result of President Assad's intransigence, Prime Minister Erdogan's status has taken a hit throughout the restive Arab world. By hesitating to criticize a fellow Muslim, his "zero problems" policy appears inane. Moreover, there's now a growing cross-border problem as Syrians flee for safety. An estimated 11,000 people are currently living in hastily built refugee camps, uncertain when or if they'll be able to return home.

Ankara is warily monitoring the Syrian situation. There are reports that the government is considering whether to close the border and form a buffer zone within Syria should further chaos ensue. One of the most feared scenarios is that the current unrest will turn into a religious civil war between the majority Sunni Muslim population and President Assad's Alawite community. Another worry is Kurdish militants establishing an operations base along the frontier to launch attacks against Turkey. Whatever the case might be, the Erdogan government has to prepare for various contingencies should Syria's turmoil worsen.

After three resoundingly impressive general election victories, there is little doubt that Recep Erdogan is Turkey's most powerful leader since Ataturk. In many respects he's the Turkish version of Andrew Jackson—an Islamist populist who has successfully challenged the secularist elite and its entrenched infrastructure. During his time in office, the nation has undergone profound changes, forging a dynamic economy and becoming a respected player on the world scene. The once all-powerful military has been brought to heel (albeit by questionable means), resulting in a more egalitarian society.

Egalitarian isn't a word that would fit Mr. Erdogan's personality, however. He governs with a heavy hand to achieve his goals. His managerial style is criticized for exhibiting an authoritarian impulse, which has a vindictive streak. The tax authorities have been empowered to go after his opponents in media and business circles. They aren't the only ones subject to this intimidation; dissension within the AKP ranks isn't tolerated. Those party cadre whose loyalty to Mr. Erdogan had been questioned were reportedly purged from candidate lists prior to the general election. Whereas the AKP once reflected a spectrum of personalities with varying outlooks, it has turned into the Prime Minister's personal fiefdom.

There are no signs in the foreseeable future that Mr. Erdogan's rule will be credibly challenged. His agenda to create a new Turkey has so far succeeded and can culminate by introducing a new constitution. Before starting this endeavor, more immediate concerns need attention, namely regional tumult, economic uncertainties and what threatens to be parliamentary impasse. Perhaps the Prime Minister can ease legislative tension by proposing to the BDP deputies that a quasi-federal status for the Kurds be considered when the constitution is drafted. It would be a bold, controversial move that the other opposition groups would promptly reject, but nonetheless initiate discussion on how to finally resolve a long-festering dilemma. If Mr. Erdogan can skillfully manage the process, he'll be remembered as the person who settled the Kurdish issue, Turkey's most burdensome problem.

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