

# Erdoğan, the Kurds, and Turkey's Presidential Elections

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To judge by the year he has had, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's prime minister, has the kind of staying power other politicians can only dream of. Having endured a series of antigovernment protests, a spectacular falling out with the Gülen community, an influential Islamic movement and onetime ally, plus a gripping, seemingly bruising corruption scandal, all of which prompted some commentators to begin drafting his political obituary, Erdoğan is not only alive and kicking, but arguably stronger than ever.

On March 30, Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) defied opponents and critics, walking away with 43 percent of the vote, almost 18 percent more than the main opposition, in a landmark local election. Today, having served a maximum of three terms as prime minister, Erdoğan is coasting towards the presidency, up for grabs in a popular vote on August 10, and pledging to transform the largely symbolic office into the strongest arm of the executive. Very little, his two opponents included, can stand in his way.

For some time now, at least part of the debate about Erdoğan's presidential bid has centered on his relationship with the Kurds.

In the spring of 2013, as secret talks between intelligence officials and Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), began to yield the first contours of a future peace deal,

a political bargain began to take shape. The pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) would back constitutional amendments intended to give Erdoğan the super-presidency he covets. The government, in exchange, would adopt amendments giving the Kurds constitutional recognition and ensure that the nascent peace process would deliver results, including the right to mother tongue education for the Kurds, some degree of decentralization, an amnesty for PKK fighters, and most controversially (given his longtime status as a terrorist leader and Turkey's public enemy number one), conditional freedom for Öcalan.

The constitutional process came to naught, but the political dynamic remains in place. The presidential election looms. If it means a continuation of the peace process, the Kurds – not the politicians, this time around, but the voters – will throw their weight behind Erdoğan.

The Kurdish political movement, of course, has its own horse in the race. Selahattin Demirtaş, the presidential candidate of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the BDP's successor, is young, charismatic, well spoken, and poised to shine on the national stage in a post-settlement political landscape. He is pro-EU, pro-green, pro-feminist, and even pro-LGBT. Were it not for his ideological ties to Öcalan and the PKK, ties which no mainstream Kurdish politician has severed without sliding into irrelevance, he would be the kind of leader many Turkish (and European) liberals and leftists would love to see at the country's helm.

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In this election, however, Demirtaş is likely to receive less than 10 percent of the vote, according to surveys.<sup>1</sup> Turkey's Kurds are said to number about 12-15 million, or up to 20 percent of the population, according to various estimates. What many outside observers overlook, however, is that the Kurds do not vote as a bloc.<sup>2</sup> Many reject Öcalan. Perhaps as many as half, especially those living outside the Kurdish-majority southeast of the country, are loyal AKP voters. Should there be a second round, in other words, Demirtaş will not be in it.

If HDP voters back Demirtaş in the first round out of loyalty, they will back Erdoğan in the second out of pragmatism. The Kurds have a love and hate relationship with the Turkish prime minister. On the one hand, they decry his nationalist instincts, his continued references to "one people, one flag and one state", and his insensitivity to the plight of those caught up in the Kurdish conflict. To date, Erdoğan still has not formally apologized to the families of the 34 people killed near the Iraqi border in late 2011 after Turkish fighter jets mistook oil smugglers for a column of PKK militants.<sup>3</sup> On the other, they appreciate that no Turkish leader has done as much for them as the prime minister. For better or worse, Kurdish voters believe, Erdoğan remains the only mainstream politician capable of addressing their demands. According to a recent Gallup poll, as many as 67 percent of Turkey's higher educated Kurds approve of the way Erdoğan has handled his job as prime minister.<sup>4</sup> Some Kurds may have begun warming to the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), but most continue to see the outfit as part of the old status quo, a party unable to wean itself from its statist past and unprepared to govern the country, much less bring the peace process to completion.

In the end, the debate about whom the Kurds might vote for in the second round might prove redundant. There will likely be no need for a runoff. Erdoğan's main opponent, Ekmelettin İhsanoğlu, the joint candidate of the two main opposition parties, has run a lackluster campaign, forsaking mass rallies, refusing to confront his rival outright, and making a point of appearing civil, statesmanlike, and tepid. To many parts of the electorate,



including the Kurds, he is palatable on paper, but difficult to get excited about in person. İhsanoğlu has been polling at around 35 percent,<sup>5</sup> but he may get even less. Many CHP voters might not bother to return home from their summer holidays to vote for a candidate they do not identify with and do not expect to win.

Erdoğan, meanwhile, assisted by a compliant state media, the AKP's sophisticated campaign machine, and the infinite resources accorded to those in power, has been rallying non-stop. Billboards featuring his image – "Man of the People", the caption reads – line the avenues of every big city. İhsanoğlu's are mostly nowhere to be seen. To no one's particular surprise, at least at this point, the prime minister is polling consistently at above 50 percent, enough to avoid a runoff.

With the discussion among Turkish pundits having filtered down to whether Erdoğan will win in the first round or in the second, the question is not so much how the Kurds will affect the election, but how the election will affect the Kurdish peace process.

Skeptics assume that Erdoğan will continue to woo the Kurds with the promise of key concessions, including an amnesty for PKK fighters, ahead the 2015 general elections, after which he will make a renewed attempt at ramming a presidential system through parliament. This is quite likely, but to assume that Erdoğan is simply using the peace process as political bait, and that he will backtrack at the first sign of a nationalist backlash, as he did during the so called "Kurdish opening" in 2009, is to misread his ambitions and overlook the fact that the process has now reached a decisive stage.

Significantly, the groundwork for a peace settlement is much better prepared today than it was in 2009. For the first time since his incarceration in 1999, Öcalan is formally playing a central role in the talks. A ceasefire declared in March 2013 has held. Thanks to a bill adopted by Turkey's parliament on July 10, the peace process has now been

1 Alexandra Hudson and Gulsen Solaker, "Turkey's Kurdish candidate says peace does not hinge on Erdogan", in *Reuters*, 21 July 2014, <http://reut.rs/1sF7qsu>.

2 Amanda Paul, "Turkey votes: Part III. President Erdoğan – A foregone conclusion?", in *EPC Commentaries*, 10 July 2014, [http://www.epc.eu/pub\\_details.php?cat\\_id=4&pub\\_id=4630](http://www.epc.eu/pub_details.php?cat_id=4&pub_id=4630); Soner Çağaptay and Ege Cansu Saçıkara, "Turks in Europe and Kurds in Turkey Could Elect Erdogan", in *PolicyWatch*, No. 2291 (23 July 2014), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turks-in-europe-and-kurds-in-turkey-could-elect-erdogan>.

3 Burak Bekdil, "Sorry, we killed you due to an unavoidable mistake!", in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 10 January 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=449&nID=60819>.

4 Gallup and Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), "Contemporary Media Use in Turkey. Presentation", in *BBG Research Series*, 30 July 2014, p. 7, <http://www.bbg.gov/?p=19088>.

5 Piotr Zaleski and Daniel Dombey, "Tale of two campaigns as Turkish opposition struggles to be heard", in *Financial Times*, 16 July 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a3f416ca-0c03-11e4-a096-00144feabd0.html>.

placed on firm legal footing, offering those involved in the PKK's disarmament and reintegration protection from prosecution.

Erdoğan can ill afford to play for time. Already in September of last year, the PKK suspended its withdrawal from Turkey into northern Iraq, one of the terms of the March ceasefire, accusing the government of failing to move ahead with reforms. Both it and the Kurds as a whole expect the settlement process to kick into gear following the August elections.

Poised to rule Turkey for another five or ten years as president, to add to his twelve years in power as prime minister, Erdoğan knows that peace with the Kurds is his ticket to the history books, the single accomplishment that might overshadow all his shortcomings as a leader. With deeply divisive issues like partial Kurdish autonomy, the PKK militants' return to Turkey, and Öcalan's freedom all on the table, the settlement process remains a potential minefield. To half the country, and to the Kurdish minority, Erdoğan appears the only politician capable of entering it without setting himself and the country aflame.