

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during March 16th - April 15th 2014

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Key Points:

- *The AKP emerges victorious in the country's municipal elections, capturing nearly 43 percent of all votes.*
- *Opposition parties fare better than in previous contests, but their split gives the AKP the upper hand at the ballot box.*
- *His party's success means that Prime Minister Tayip Erdogan will likely run for the presidency in August's first ever election by popular vote.*
- *Erdogan's government blocks social media sites, referring to critics as "enemies" and further degrading political discourse in the Republic.*
- *Recordings of high-level military and political meetings continue to leak to the public, and are used by the AKP as justification to push for bans of many social media platforms.*
- *The presence of hundreds of thousands of mainly Sunni Syrian refugees in southern Turkey continues to concern Turkey's Alevi communities.*
- *The situation in Syria remains static, but a large-scale military escalation has the potential to severely destabilize Turkey's southern provinces.*

AKP and Erdogan emerge victorious in elections

Though seemingly hampered over the past year by a slowing economy, violent street protests and an open rupture with the Gulen Movement, the AKP has once again emerged victorious in elections.

The ruling party ran a national referendum for municipal races, pitting the polarizing Prime Minister Tayip Erdogan against a fractured coalition of opposition parties. Despite those parties running strong candidates in several races, especially in Ankara and Istanbul, the AKP's ability to get its voters to the ballot box assured victory.

The AKP won 43 percent of votes cast, the CHP 26 percent, the MHP 18 percent and the BDP captured 7 percent. The latter took six mayoral seats in the Kurdish southeast, winning 60 percent of the votes cast in those areas. For their part, the MHP and CHP continue to lag well behind the AKP, garnering only 18 and 26 percent respectively. However, with future contests in mind, much has been made of their ability to capture roughly the same total as the AKP.

In the context of the 2011 elections, it is obvious that the ruling party continues to be a step ahead of its rivals, but the past year's events have hampered its results. The AKP's share of the votes dropped nearly seven percent up from an astounding 50 percent of votes in 2011, while the percentages of the three main opposition parties all ticked slightly upward in 2014's election.

In the Istanbul mayoral race, an anti-AKP coalition never actually coalesced. Though hopes were high for charismatic CHP candidate Mustafa Sarigul, he was only able to accrue 40.1 percent of the city's votes. Incumbent mayor Kadir Topbas, assisted by rallies headlined by AKP heavyweights like the prime minister, easily retained his seat with 47.9 percent of the vote. Though it must be said, drawing such large crowds was likely made easier given that Istanbul's public transportation services, including buses, ferries and subways, were made available for free to AKP supporters. ("AKP rally participants able to use public transport for free," Today's Zaman, 23 March 2014.)

In the capital of Ankara, a combined MHP and CHP push nearly closed the gap against AKP incumbent mayor Melih Gokcek. Yet Gokcek, again aided by the party's incredible get out the vote campaign and his own significant popularity, rode out a narrow win with 44.6 percent of the vote against his CHP opponent Mansur Yavas. Given the razor thin margin, the CHP protested the results to the national election board, which ultimately upheld the original vote. (Solaker and Hogg, "Election board rejects Turkish opposition call for Ankara re-run," Reuters, 9 April 2014.)

The mayoral races, aside from their legitimate importance, were also a referendum on Erdogan that many pollsters watched with anticipation. Though circumstances could certainly change in coming months, Erdogan looks set to run for president in the summer, where he will need to win 50 percent of the popular vote.

Where he will capture that additional 5-10 percent remains questionable, but all signs point to a push for the Kurdish BDP vote. Compared to previous Turkish rulers, both civilian and military, Erdogan has a relatively positive reputation in the country's Kurdish southeast. In recent months he has made trips to cities in the company of Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani, while maintaining dialogue with the PKK through negotiations with its imprisoned leader, Abdullah Ocalan.

In May, the AKP hierarchy will meet and decide how it will address the issue of the August presidential election, Turkey's first to be decided by popular vote. Current President Abdullah Gul has yet to announce his intentions about the post. The first election is on August 10, and if no candidate secures a majority, a run off is scheduled for August 24.

Gul, a savvy politician in his own right, has likely appraised the prime minister's staying power following the municipal elections. Though he has denied an agreement has been reached between the two, it appears unlikely that he will challenge Erdogan for the presidency come August. Given the recent election results and a lack of popular opposition

figures, Turkey's next president looks to be decided by the AKP Central Decision and Election Board in May.

Deep State dead?

Standing before adoring crowds as the election results came in from AKP Party Headquarters in Ankara, the prime minister basked in the glory of his party's success and threatened to respond to enemies who he believed attempted a coup with the December 17, 2013 graft investigations.

"Now is the time to flush them out [from state institutions] within the law," he said. (Dombey, "Turkey's Erdogan triumphant after resounding poll victory," The Financial Times, 31 March 2014.)

His post-election vitriol drew the ire of the New York Times editorial board, who wrote that "Mr. Erdogan has disparaged his political adversaries as traitors, terrorists and an alliance of evil. In his postelection speech, he repeatedly mentioned Pennsylvania and suggested the government would take aim at Mr. Gulen's supporters, possibly with mass arrests." ("Prime Minister Erdogan's Revenge," The New York Times, 31 April 2014.)

While never guilty of tact, Erdogan's response to a number of unsettling events prior to the elections must be taken in context. This isn't to say he and his government's attempts to ban social media sites like Twitter and YouTube was an appropriate response. Nor does it excuse his reactions to criticism with accusations of treason.

But legitimate questions do remain on just how a high-level national security council meeting on possible military action in Syria was recorded and released to the public on YouTube. ("WRAP UP: Ankara on alert after spying on security meeting leaked," Hurriyet Daily News, 27 March 2014.)

Furthermore, recent investigations by prosecutors replacing those purged in the aftermath of the December 17 graft probes uncovered a substantial wiretapping program in the Istanbul prosecutor's office. (Karaveli, "Trial by Twitter," Foreign Affairs, 25

March 2014.) Amongst the thousands under surveillance were the prime minister himself, along with several ministers of the AKP government.

Erdogan, unsurprisingly, blamed the Fethullah Gulen Movement. After trumped up trials against secular and military elites, the most obvious enemy is the unrepentant former AKP-ally, Gulen.

The security council leaks came after an already fraught battle over access to the social media site Twitter ahead of the elections. "We now have a court order," Erdogan said. "We'll eradicate Twitter. I don't care what the international community says. Everyone will witness the power of the Turkish Republic." (Berger and Rusch, "Turkish Prime Minister Says He Will 'Eradicate Twitter' After Elections," BuzzFeed.com, 20 March 2014.)

Though the order was eventually overturned by the courts, the leaks and the prime minister's rhetoric reflect on an increasingly polarized Turkey. On the one hand, it can be said that the prime minister sees no line between criticism of his government's policies and subversion. That is especially high irony coming from a man who once spent time in a prison cell for statements that alienated the country's former power brokers.

Yet there is also a concerning element in the amount of high-level audio and video leaks that have arisen since the Gulen-AKP split began in December. Though with Turkey's history of the military Deep State, which has deposed previous civilian governments through similar tactics, it hardly seems fair to pin the blame on the Gulen Movement. For now at least.

Syria

Specifically, the leaked security council audio tape revealed a high level military discussion on a possible cross-border military incursion into Syria as that country's government forces push back against rebels.

Ongoing infighting between moderate rebel forces and Islamic fundamentalist groups there has exacerbated fears in Turkey's southern provinces. In Hatay, the presence of mainly Sunni Syrian refugees

continues to cause concern amongst the province's substantial Alevi community.

Located just across the border from Syria, only 72 kilometers from the street fighting in Aleppo, fears in Hatay run the gamut from a loss of jobs, rising rents and potential terrorist strikes by Sunni fundamentalists.

In late March, a Turkish F-16 downed a Syrian MIG-23 that had crossed into Turkish airspace, though the Syrian pilot did reportedly eject and survive the crash. There is little chance, however, that such incidents will kick off a full scale military conflict between the

two countries unless one party decides such action is in their interest.

Under Erdogan, Turkey seems content to allow rebels to make cross border incursions as long as they remain active only south of the border in Syria. Yet, as its refugee population swells, the government will face increasing pressure to push for a solution to the bloody sectarian war in Syria. Should Turkey's economic outlook face a downturn, tensions in places like Hatay have the potential to do more than simmer.

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