

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during July 16th -Aug 15th 2014

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Key Points:

- *Prime Minister Tayip Erdogan becomes the first popularly elected president of the Turkish Republic, capturing 51.7 percent of the vote and avoiding a run off.*
- *Since the Presidency is still a largely ceremonial post, expect President-elect Erdogan to push hard for the 2015 parliamentary elections where an AKP majority win could pave the way for a constitutional change that empowers the executive branch.*
- *Turkey tries to help the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq hold the line, while negotiations continue for Turkish hostages held by the Islamic State (IS).*
- *Following the latest Hamas-Israeli clash in the Gaza Strip, Turkey foreswears all cooperation with the Jewish state until the combat stops.*
- *Turkey continues to balance economic ties between Erbil and Baghdad over oil shipments from the KRG, while the South Stream gas pipeline passes an environmental impact study off the Turkish Black Sea coast.*

President Erdogan

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, one of the great populist politicians of the current era, needed to do little to avoid a defeat in the Republic of Turkey's first popularly elected presidential race. While geopolitical storms raged on the country's borders, Erdogan used the massive power as the incumbent prime minister in the weeks before the August 10 election.

No doubt he was assisted by a fawning domestic press, which has largely been cowed over the past decade by corruption and tax inquiries into outlets that were critical of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). This was best exemplified by the resignation of Daily Hurriyet editor, Enis Berberoglu, following the prime minister's vehement criticism of one of the paper's reporters during an early-August political rally. ("Hurriyet editor-in-chief resigns a day after PM targets Dogan media," Today's Zaman, 8 August 2014.) The paper is a subsidiary of Dogan Media Group, a conglomerate that has frequently drawn the ire of the AKP government and was fined \$2.5 billion for tax evasion in 2009, a case that was seen as a politically motivated.

Erdogan's opponents in the presidential race, Republican People's Party-Nationalist Movement Party (CHP-MHP) candidate Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu and People's Democratic (Kurdish HDP) Selahattin Demirtas were also vocal critics of the media's favourable treatment of the prime minister. Demirtas loudly complained about public broadcaster Turkish Radio and Television Corporation's (TRT) airing of the prime minister's political rallies and campaign events. TRT Chairman, Ibrahim Sahin, threatened to ban the KDP candidate from the state broadcaster if he continued with his criticism in July.

In one of the great retorts of the campaign, Demirtas responded on the stations airwaves on August 3:

With little to go until the presidential elections, I am experiencing excitement and happiness to be addressing you from the screens of the TRT, (a channel) that you all follow closely and which is

absolutely impartial, objective and equidistant from all candidates and which, above all, is a precious institution that has displayed justice and courtesy to me in the most magnificent fashion. ("Public broadcaster TRT at center of contention during campaign," Daily Hurriyet, 10 August 2014.)

Media bias aside, Erdogan's victory in the elections appeared assured as polls opened on Sunday, August 10. Though closer than initially predicted, Erdogan avoided a run-off by winning a 51.8 percent majority in the first round, while CHP-MHP candidate Ihsanoglu and the KDP's Demirtas captured 38.4 percent and 9.8 percent, respectively.

The president-elect's victory was sealed up in the Anatolian heartland, while also capturing 49 percent of the votes in Istanbul and 51 percent in the nation's capital, Ankara. This makes it nine electoral victories in a row for Erdogan, an impressive feat no matter how one sided the media coverage was in the most recent contest. And while he is a polarizing figure, and looks to continue along that path, the president-elect and his party's electoral victories can be attributed to economic success in the years since Erdogan first ascended to the prime minister's post in 2003.

Over the past decade his party's success has centred on two competencies: economic performance and political savvy. Per capita incomes in Turkey have risen by 40 percent while inflation, the country's longest running economic problem, has been managed well by the AKP's economic policies. (Cagaptay, "Why Erdogan Will Win," The Los Angeles Times, 7 August 2014.) On top of this, Erdogan's ability to tap into the conservative Muslim majority of Turkish voters is an unparalleled advantage. President-elect Erdogan plays the "other" card on a regular basis against his opponents, whether it be the secular military establishment, exiled cleric Fethullah Gulen or Alevi CHP Chairman Kemal Kilicdaroglu.

This oppositional tact towards those who oppose the AKP will continue in the coming year as the AKP attempts to force through new laws creating an

imperial presidency. Currently, the presidential office is largely symbolic and apolitical, meaning Erdogan must resign from his membership in the AKP. A new prime minister and AKP leader will be chosen in a soon-to-be-announced party convention, though in all likelihood this individual will serve as a figurehead for Erdogan, whose influence over the party remains unchallenged.

The ultimate goal will be the capture of an outright majority in the 2015 parliamentary elections so as to codify the presidential system in a new constitution. Until then, though in the ceremonial post as president, he will likely utilize obscure and never before used powers under the current constitution, which was instituted by the military following the 1982 coup. These powers will allow him to appoint the prime minister and the heads of the constitutional court and supreme council of judges. (Ulgen, "Erdogan is the Victor But He is Not Yet Almighty," The Financial Times, 11 August 2014.)

Though the margin was closer than initially predicted, this was yet another blow for demoralized CHP and MHP voters who now face the possibility of a two-term President Erdogan potentially ruling until 2023. Though the choice of a joint candidate with conservative Muslim credentials like Ihsanoglu likely had some impact in whittling down Erdogan's vote total, it was too little, too late by the time the election was underway. In the coming months the MHP and CHP will return to their normal post-election soul searching, but continuing with the same ideas fronted by a different candidate each election is not the way to beat the AKP. To appeal to a wider group of voters, the parties need to realize that Turkey has changed, and they must do so with it.

As for the Kurdish HDP, it largely performed as expected and will likely remain the kingmaker ahead of the 2015 parliamentary elections. The party's deputies sit in parliament as independents due to a threshold requirement, and their ability to help pass legislation in parliament should the AKP fail in its majority bid means that the PKK-peace and

reconciliation process will continue, a positive for the country as a whole.

President-elect Erdogan's ascendancy to the office has been compared with Russia's 2012 presidential switch between Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev. Certainly Erdogan's personality and confrontational style makes such comparisons easier to stomach. Yet the contrast falls short when looking back on the fairness of Turkey's electoral process, given that the latest contest was monitored by European observers. Should the constitution be changed through a parliamentary vote next year, it will create a presidential system on par with France's own strong executive government. Simply put, Erdogan is an excellent politician who emerged on the scene at the right time. Until the minority parties discover an effective way to coalesce their current support into a true coalition that appeals outside of their currently narrow base, Erdogan may well be president when the Republic's centennial is celebrated in 2023.

Iraqi Kurdistan under attack

Turkey, home to more than a million refugees fleeing the Syrian Civil War, will add to that number Iraqi Yazidis who have taken flight from northern Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan after the Islamic State (formerly ISIS) rolled back the Kurdish peshmerga in early August.

Few, including this author, foresaw the largely foreign-born Islamic State fighters as capable of overrunning the peshmerga, who, until recent events, have been viewed as the only regional force adept enough to meet them with equal force in the field. Faced with withering fire from Islamic State fighters using seized American-made weapons formerly belonging to the Iraqi Army, peshmerga forces fell back in a haphazard retreat towards the KRG capital of Erbil.

One KRG government official responded to a question from CNN about the Islamic State's capture of the strategically important Mosul Dam, "They attacked with M1 Abrams tanks!"

Yazidis, who are a religious minority in Iraq considered apostates by the Islamic State, faced mass killings and kidnappings before fleeing to the relative safety of a mountain. There, nearly 40,000 endured starvation and lack of water before action was finally taken. Iraqi military forces began dropping Turkish aid to the stranded Yazidis, and American and British assistance soon began flowing to both the refugees and to the Kurdish fighters attempting to push back the Islamic State. American military forces have also begun conducting air raids to take out Iraqi army weapons used by the Islamic State fighters, including destroying artillery pieces being used to shell Erbil.

The Islamic State's success is an unintended consequence of the current Turkish government's policies towards Syria. Ankara's open-door policy for those fighting the government forces of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad provided foreign fighters, many from the West, to swell the ranks of radical Islamist groups like the IS and the al-Nusra Front. In Turkish towns like Reyhanli, wounded Syrian opposition fighters from across the spectrum were treated while arms and healthy fighters flowed south. (Faiola and Mekhennet, "In Turkey, a late crackdown on Islamist fighters," *The Washington Post*, 12 August 2014.)

While it is not fair to criticize Turkey for opposing the bloody crackdown by the al-Assad government on initially peaceful protests, Turkey must now work to seal its external and internal borders to individuals from groups like the Islamic State. It must also tread carefully in its actions, as 41 of the Turkish hostages seized in the Islamic State's capture of the Iraqi city of Mosul still remain in custody.

Yet Ankara was as shaken as its allies in the West by the defeat of KRG forces, and has even begun discussions with the PKK's Syrian affiliate, the PYD, who has managed to thus far hold off Islamic State encroachment into Kurdish cities and towns in northeast Syria. Now that the Americans and other Western powers like France have begun openly arming and supporting Kurdish fighters in northern

Iraq, Turkey will mainly be a supply and transportation hub for these operations. For now, the safety of the hostages is paramount in the leaders' minds, leaving the country with little to do until the Islamic State is defeated.

Energy

Energy Minister Taner Yildiz stepped into the political realm in early August when asked about economic cooperation between Israel and Turkey in light of the former's most recent incursion into Gaza.

"An energy project's economic feasibility is also important as its political feasibility and now, if we build a natural gas pipeline between Israel and Turkey, innocent children's blood would flow from this pipeline," said Yildiz. ("Turkey pills out of joint energy policy with Israel," www.WorldBulletin.net, 4 August 2014).

He went on to say that discussions could resume once Gazan militants and Israeli Defense Forces halted the conflict, leaving some hope for common ground between Ankara and Jerusalem on the Leviathan and Tamar natural gas fields. They lie in the busy eastern Mediterranean, and Tamar has been generating gas for Israeli production since March 2013. Leviathan is expected to begin production in 2017. Given Turkey's championing of the Palestinian's cause and Israel's continued stance towards rockets fired from the Gaza Strip, economic production may be the only viable middle ground the two countries can effectively maintain a dialogue on.

While the Kurdish peshmerga were rolled back by the Islamic State in northern Iraq, the pipeline connecting the KRG and Turkey has maintained uninterrupted fuel transfers. The pipeline, which has been in operation since December 2013, connects with the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline in Turkey and is offloaded onto ships in the Turkish port of Ceyhan. The status of those shipments remains in question as the Iraqi government in Baghdad has declared any shipments emanating from the KRG to be illegal.

Energy Minister Yildiz has given the Turkish government's opinion, telling members of parliament that regardless of its starting point, according to a 2010 Iraqi government agreement and a 1973 Crude Oil Pipeline Agreement any crude shipped from Iraqi territory is legal regardless of where it emanates from.

The Iraqi Government of outgoing Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has an understandably different view, and is suing Turkey's state-owned BOTAS and the government at the International Chamber of Commerce in Paris, France. It has also delivered cease and desist letters to potential customers of Kurdish oil, threatening to sue if the shipments are offloaded on foreign soil. Only Israeli ports have ignored the threats from Baghdad, selling the Kurdish crude to unnamed buyers. ("Whitcomb," Future of Landlocked Kurdistan Depends on Turkey's Next Move," www.Rudaw.net, 7 July 2014).

That said, the onslaught from the Islamic State has forced changes in Baghdad as Iraq hurriedly attempts to form a new, more inclusive government after the failed tenure of Prime Minister al-Maliki. Should that happen, the issue of oil revenues between Erbil and Baghdad might be smoothed over, with Turkey being a major beneficiary from an economic and energy standpoint as its economic progress drives up demand.

Turkey has also moved a step closer with its granting of an environmental impact assessment for the Russian-backed South Stream pipeline. The project, according to the report by the Turkish Environment and Urbanization Ministry, will not have a significant impact on Turkey's Black Sea waters.

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