



Turkey in Turmoil

The upcoming Turkish elections will shape the future of a key NATO ally.

By Michael Werz and Max Hoffman March 27, 2014

A little more than a decade ago, the Turkish Justice and Development Party, or AKP, and its main protagonist, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, celebrated a historic electoral victory. Founded in 2001, the AKP mobilized a broad alliance—consisting of religious and social conservatives, members of the newly emergent Anatolian middle class, and liberal Turks frustrated with the coalition government of the democratic left and establishment nationalists—to become the country’s first and only popular, broad-based national party.¹

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s biography exemplified the transformation within Turkish society that underpinned this political shift. Erdoğan immigrated to fast-growing Istanbul at the age of 13 from a rural province on Turkey’s Black Sea coast.² He later built a political career by connecting with underprivileged, rural, and religious Turks, who had been largely ignored by the traditional Turkish political elite.

After its watershed victory in the 2002 elections, the AKP—with Prime Minister Erdoğan at the helm—oversaw a decade of strong economic growth, began important reforms to move Turkey toward EU membership, and softened the Turkish state’s traditionally harsh stance toward religious and ethnic minority groups.³ Alongside its broad popular support, the AKP built a potent political machine based on awarding patronage and government contracts to business leaders in exchange for financial support and positive coverage from media arms affiliated with those business leaders.⁴ Building upon their economic record and the support of religious and socially conservative Turks and powerful Anatolian business interests, the AKP secured additional decisive electoral victories in 2007 and 2011.

A crucial test

Turkey will head to the polls on March 30 for key local elections for the first time since 2009. While voters will choose members of provincial and municipal councils, as well as mayors, across the country, control of Istanbul—home to nearly 20 percent of the Turkish population⁵ and the launch pad for Prime Minister Erdoğan’s own political

career—is the real prize. Control of the capital, Ankara, is also at stake, and the result there will help shape the political narrative following the elections, although to a lesser extent than Istanbul. Additionally, even though these local elections are ostensibly supposed to address local concerns, the major political parties and most political observers are framing the vote as a referendum on the rule of Prime Minister Erdoğan and the AKP. The percentage of votes earned by each party nationwide will carry great political weight, helping define the popular will in advance of Turkey’s first-ever direct presidential election in August 2014.

These elections are a crucial test of Prime Minister Erdoğan’s legitimacy, which has been eroded by years of suppression of dissent and revelations of corruption within his party. It will be the first opportunity for Turkish voters to express their opinions in the wake of a series of political upheavals and scandals that have considerably weakened the AKP’s brand. Turkey was rocked by the Gezi Park protests and subsequent police crackdown on protesters and critical media voices in May 2013.⁶ The draconian tactics employed by the police and the divisive rhetoric used by the prime minister in response to the protests alienated many urban and middle-class Turks.⁷ Then, a series of corruption investigations into the prime minister’s close associates were made public in December following pre-dawn raids on several AKP stalwarts.⁸ Widespread media coverage of the cases has been stoked by regularly leaked recordings of the prime minister and his confidantes discussing bribes, kickbacks, and the use of the judiciary to punish political rivals.⁹

The AKP says the investigations are politically motivated—orchestrated by exiled religious leader Fethullah Gülen’s followers in the police and the judiciary, referred to as Gülenists—and denounces the cases as an attempted coup.¹⁰ The public falling out between former allies of the AKP and supporters of the prime minister has shattered the party’s conservative coalition and threatens its decade-long hegemony. This challenge has prompted a strong backlash from the prime minister’s supporters inside and outside of government, including the passage of controversial laws granting greater parliamentary authority over the appointment of judges and prosecutors and a new law tightening government control over the Internet.¹¹

In short, the elections will demonstrate the extent to which Turkish voters have turned on the prime minister in light of his autocratic tendencies and charges of widespread corruption. Observers in Washington and European capitals will be watching the polls closely, as the result will likely shape Prime Minister Erdoğan’s course on a range of important issues surrounding the rule of law, freedom of the press, and the Kurdish peace process.

Off the rails

The past two years have shown that the great political strengths that gave the prime minister such staying power—his populism and the AKP’s patronage system—have become liabilities. Since assuming power in 2003, Erdoğan has shown himself capable of speaking directly to his supporters, bypassing the elite-led party structures that had traditionally dominated Turkish politics. He initially used this approach to mobilize support for initiatives, including democratic reforms aimed at EU membership and the extension of important rights to Kurdish and other minorities. In addition, his party delivered significant improvements in economic standards and important initiatives to broaden access to health care.

Alongside these tangible efforts, the prime minister championed popular initiatives designed to mobilize his conservative and pious base, such as fighting to remove the ban on headscarves for women in public education and government offices and picking diplomatic fights with Israel.¹² But after more than one decade in power, he has largely exhausted the populist policy initiatives that are available to him—and that the Turkish state can afford. Meanwhile, a worsening macroeconomic environment characterized by softening stimulus from the U.S. Federal Reserve and a \$64 billion account deficit has brought greater scrutiny to the AKP’s economic record.¹³

Over the past three years, the prime minister has relied on ever more divisive and controversial refrains to whip up support. Erdoğan’s rhetoric has turned increasingly exclusive and hostile, focused on demonizing his opponents rather than promoting unity. The abuse of the patronage system after a decade in power contributed to the political rift with the Gülenists and the corruption allegations that now threaten his rule, prompting further angry outbursts from the prime minister.

The AKP’s efforts to control criticism by exerting control of the media¹⁴ through economic and political pressure on journalists and owners have further alienated liberal Turks who were initially sympathetic to the party’s pro-EU stance and have exacerbated concerns about the prime minister’s authoritarian turn. Erdoğan has become increasingly paranoid and hostile in the face of legitimate criticism, and he and his inner circle have sought scapegoats, concocting elaborate conspiracy theories with enemies including the airline Lufthansa, the *Financial Times*, the Jews, telekinesis, and the Queen of England, to name just a few.¹⁵

This paranoia and desperation is, at least in part, the result of the prime minister’s failure to embrace institutional reform and respect the rule of law. He has demonstrated that he believes the ballot box to be the sole source and arbiter of legitimacy, dismissing criticism of corruption or judicial malpractice and claiming the people—“his people”—will decide what is acceptable. This formulation has further undermined the already fragile and poorly functioning judicial system and the free press. Additionally, while Erdoğan’s

combative democratic approach might be defensible if he had triumphed in a free market of ideas, he and his allies have used extrajudicial means to silence critics and hamstring the press—retaliating against journalists, Kurdish activists, protestors, scholars, and former allies in the conservative Gülen movement.¹⁶ Because he relies entirely on the ballot box and controlling the narrative, Prime Minister Erdoğan cannot permit a countervailing narrative that might challenge his conversation with his constituents.

The stakes

The AKP's conspiracy theories have made the new Turkey look very similar to the old Turkey. Certain institutions within the Turkish state structure—such as the Turkish National Police, the Gendarmerie, the National Intelligence Organization, the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors, and the military's General Staff—have long been distinct seats of power and often acted at cross-purposes. As a result, changing political circumstances can dramatically alter the application of the law.

The recent corruption investigations should be partly seen in this light: Prime Minister Erdoğan and his supporters are struggling with conservative opponents for control of the state structure. While this is not a new phenomenon in Turkish politics, the de facto suspension of the rule of law and the politically motivated reassignment of thousands of police officers and prosecutors¹⁷ has shocked a country that has long lacked institutional checks and balances. The current consolidation of the conservative political camp—played out in part within the state structure—comes at great cost for Turkish society and institutional development, and the country might face a prolonged and chaotic transition period.

The March 30 elections are a crucial point in this transition, and the stakes are high. The corruption allegations against Prime Minister Erdoğan, his family, and his close political and business associates mean that he might have to stand trial if he loses the immunity provided by his office.¹⁸ Additionally, the recent legislation establishing greater government leverage over prosecutors, judges, and the Internet—and proposed legislation expanding and shifting the domestic authority of the intelligence community—have strengthened the already potent tools of the state.¹⁹ As one analyst put it, “these are not laws you hand down to your opposition.”²⁰ The fact that Erdoğan cannot afford to lose creates a dangerous situation.

The elections will also have an impact on the international and regional level. Already, Erdoğan's aggressive anti-Western and veiled anti-Semitic rhetoric is alienating allies in Europe and the United States. The government's shutdown of Twitter in response to the posting of recordings linked to the corruption scandal was the latest and starkest illustration of this trend.²¹ Just hours before the ban took effect, the prime minister told a rally of supporters that, “The international community can say this, can say that. I don't care

at all. Everyone will see how powerful the Republic of Turkey is.”²² The crackdown on social media has drawn the ire of the United States and the European Union, with U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Douglas Frantz likening it to “21st century book burning.”²³

As an official candidate for EU membership since 1999 and a member of the customs union since 1995, Turkey’s EU accession process has provided access to the strongest consumer market in the region.²⁴ The aspiration to be part of Europe also underpinned Turkey’s uneven democratization and attempts to bolster minority rights. A decade ago, the EU process held out the promise of domestic reform and an end to Turkey’s authoritarian traditions. Today, the AKP is effectively scuttling Turkey’s accession prospects in its desperation to weather the corruption scandal. For many western-oriented Turks, the March 30 elections will be an opportunity to voice concerns about this development.

Furthermore, Prime Minister Erdoğan’s erratic behavior and the weakening of the rule of law have hurt Turkey’s reputation with international investors and threaten its economic prospects. Over the past two years, Erdoğan has repeatedly decried a vague “interest rate lobby” that, he claims, is stifling Turkey’s growth and wants to “suck Turkey’s blood.”²⁵ He has also repeatedly challenged well-established economic principles by claiming that high interest rates contribute to high inflation and subjected the Turkish central bank to enormous political pressure to keep rates low, equating any decision to raise rates as “sabotage” and part of a conspiracy to hold Turkey back economically.²⁶ Investors have responded negatively, and the benchmark Borsa Istanbul 100 Index has fallen 20 percent over the past year.²⁷

On top of maintaining low rates in the face of a falling lira, Erdoğan and the AKP have inaugurated a series of massive infrastructure projects, including a third bridge over the Bosphorus—estimated at more than \$2 billion—and a third airport for Istanbul that is set to cost \$30 billion.²⁸ In addition to serving as economic stimulus, the projects help bolster the party’s political fortunes; the projects represent a boon to construction conglomerates close to the party that have won the contracts, the foundation of the AKP’s political machine in politically crucial Istanbul.²⁹ Turkey is reckoning with the stark limits of a construction- and consumption-driven economic growth model in a resource-poor country, exacerbating the political crisis.

Perhaps the most important long-term issue at stake in the elections is the future of the Turkish state’s negotiations with the historically militant Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK, labeled a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States, and the European Union.³⁰ Past efforts at a lasting peaceful settlement to Turkey’s long-standing “Kurdish question” have been victims of election-year politics, when the temptation to resort to nationalist rhetoric to capture votes has often led to tensions with Kurdish political leaders. Erdoğan, seeking to hold together a winning electoral coalition in the face of a splintering conservative movement, is walking a tightrope between Kurdish and nationalist Turkish voters in this regard.

Electoral scenarios

Despite the precarious state of Turkish politics and the evident excesses of the AKP, it is likely that the party and Prime Minister Erdoğan will avoid a serious defeat at the polls. While the main opposition Republican People's Party, or CHP, has sought to broaden the party's appeal, Turkey still lacks an opposition party capable of mobilizing a broad base of voters at the national scale.

The AKP received 38.8 percent of all votes cast in the most recent local elections in 2009 and has said that this level of support remains their threshold for success—although the party received close to 50 percent in the more recent 2011 general election, which is perhaps a better point of reference.³¹ Reliable polling is notoriously difficult in Turkey, but recent opinion surveys show that the party's overall favorability has fallen down to 42.3 percent, the lowest in three years. The CHP has seen a general favorability rise to 29.8 percent, while the Nationalist Action Party, or MHP, on the extreme right has risen to 18.7 percent.³² Despite these general indicators of weakening AKP support, there remains a large pool of undecided voters³³—even this close to the elections—and it is very difficult to accurately predict how the national mood will translate into municipal vote totals. Most observers agree, however, that turnout is likely to be high.³⁴

Because the elections have been cast as a referendum by both sides and because of Prime Minister Erdoğan's decision to elevate the ballot as the sole source of legitimacy, almost any result will immediately spark a new political fight to interpret the popular will in advance of Turkey's first-ever direct presidential election in August 2014. Since the AKP earned 38 percent of the vote in the most recent local elections, any result higher than that will be portrayed as a victory and vindication of the prime minister. A result in the 38 percent to 40 percent range will be regarded by most as a hold and will likely change little in Turkey; Prime Minister Erdoğan will continue to ignore his critics. Observers agree that a result of less than 38 percent for the AKP will represent a real defeat.³⁵

The ramifications of victory or defeat are hard to predict. Many analysts believe that a win for Erdoğan and the AKP will prompt further authoritarian action, including the passage of a controversial proposed intelligence law and further purges of the police and judiciary to quash the corruption cases.³⁶ But other observers likewise fear desperate measures from the governing party should they be dealt a serious blow at the polls.³⁷ An AKP loss in Istanbul would bolster the forces critical of Erdoğan within the AKP and spark a broader debate within the religious wing of the polity on morality, corruption, and the future of the AKP government.

While such a loss is unlikely, it would threaten two key foundations of the AKP power structure. First, it would cast Erdoğan as a drag on the party's electoral fortunes, rather than its champion. Second, it would be a crushing blow to the party's patronage system. As Henri Barkey, a leading Turkey analyst, puts it, "Istanbul is to the AKP what oil is to

Saudi Arabia—it is not just politics, it is also the source of all their rents and resources, through property deals and construction contracts.³⁸ Finally, and almost forgotten amid the focus on the AKP's fortunes, a CHP upset in Istanbul would vastly elevate their candidate, Mustafa Sarıgül, within the CHP and at the national level—potentially presenting the first personality with the popularity to challenge Erdoğan.

With the stakes so high, both major parties have warned of the risk of electoral fraud, and the CHP has said it will deploy as many as 500,000 observers.³⁹ Despite the major challenges facing Turkey's democratic development, the integrity of the polls have not been questioned. Electoral fraud of any meaningful scale would represent a serious deterioration and likely spark massive street protests in major cities. The worst-case scenario is that these protests could provoke a violent crackdown from the authorities. While such an outcome remains unlikely, it could neutralize a decade of Turkish development. It would also require a thorough reevaluation of bilateral relations by the United States and European countries.

The elections seem to hold little hope for the crucial Kurdish peace process. The corruption scandal was presaged by the collapse of negotiations over the drafting of a new constitution,⁴⁰ and the heated party atmosphere has put meaningful negotiations on pause for the near term, leaving no institutional process to address Kurdish concerns. Additionally, the nationalist MHP is expected to gain votes,⁴¹ and a large gain may be interpreted as nationalist backlash to the ceasefire and the negotiations with PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, shrinking the political space for the talks. The only bright spot for Kurds is the likelihood that the majority-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party, or BDP, will gain votes, particularly in southeastern cities such as Diyarbakir,⁴² demonstrating that political gains can permanently replace the armed struggle.

Consolidation phase

The March 30 elections do not appear to hold the promise of an immediate resolution to Turkey's political crisis, although they do hold the slight possibility of a violent deterioration. More likely, a muddled result will mark another waypoint in a protracted period of consolidation and revision within the broad conservative movement. For the CHP, the success of their lineup of relatively diverse and young candidates will likely contribute to a slow rebranding of the party as a more inclusive, socially democratic alternative to the AKP. The BDP and the associated Free Democratic Party, or HDP, for their part, will view electoral gains as the continuation of their political emancipation from a militant past and another step in their transformation to a modern party with nationwide appeal for liberals.

Turkish society and politics will endure a painful consolidation phase over the next year. The battle within the conservative movement risks permanent, irreparable damage to Turkish political and judicial institutions. There also remains the risk that Prime Minister Erdoğan will further deepen societal divisions within the country in an effort to hold onto power or, at worst, attempt to influence the polls. Such an outcome would be a disastrous setback for Turkey and cause for serious diplomatic reactions from the United States and European Union.

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- 34 Consensus of experts at roundtable event at the Center for American Progress, March 13, 2014; Turnout, even in local elections, is generally high. See Ali Çarkoğlu, "Turkey Goes to the Ballot Box: 2014 Municipal Elections and Beyond" (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2014), available at <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/03/13%20turkey%20ballot%20box%20municipal%20elections%20carkoglu/13%20turkey%20ballot%20box%20municipal%20elections%20carkoglu.pdf>; Turnout in 2011 was 83 percent, albeit for a general election. Ahmet Insel, "Local Elections in Istanbul and Erdoğan's Political Future," *Al Jazeera*, December 5, 2013, available at <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2013/12/2013125104331596106.htm>.
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- 36 These fears are widespread, articulated by numerous Turkish commentators. Echoed by Dr. Gokhan Bacik; journalist Yavuz Baydar; Gönül Tol, founding director of Center for Turkish Studies at the Middle East Institute; Henri Barkey, Professor of International Relations at Lehigh University and former member of the U.S. State Department Policy Planning Staff at a roundtable event at the Center for American Progress, March 13, 2014; In the Turkish press see, for example, Burak Kilic "AK Party promises more despotism if it wins big in local polls," *Today's Zaman*, March 25, 2014, available at <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-343043-ak-party-promises-more-despotism-if-it-wins-big-in-local-polls.html>.
- 37 See, for example, Burak Kilic, "AK Party promises more despotism if it wins big in local polls," *Today's Zaman*, March 25, 2014, available at <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-343043-ak-party-promises-more-despotism-if-it-wins-big-in-local-polls.html>.
- 38 Henri Barkey, Professor of International Relations at Lehigh University and former member of the U.S. State Department Policy Planning Staff, roundtable event at the Center for American Progress, March 13, 2014.
- 39 Jonny Hogg and Gulsen Solaker, "Rival parties warn of fraud in Turkey's key local elections," Reuters, March 20, 2014, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/20-us-turkey-election-idUSBREA2J1CO20140320>.
- 40 Gulsen Solaker, "Hopes fade for a new Turkish constitution," Reuters, November 18, 2013, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/18/us-turkey-constitution-idUSBRE9AH0OV20131118>.
- 41 Çarkoğlu, "Turkey Goes to the Ballot Box"; Kadir Yıldırım, "Turkey: The road to a democratic future."
- 42 Çarkoğlu, "Turkey Goes to the Ballot Box"; A BDP gain is widely expected by Turkish political observers who the authors met with in Turkey and Washington over the past three months. Publicly, see, for example, Yavuz Baydar, "Harder times ahead, no matter who wins," *Today's Zaman*, March 25, 2014, available at http://www.todayszaman.com/columnists/yavuz-baydar_343030-harder-times-ahead-no-matter-who-wins.html.