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Assessing the Turkish Elections



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By the narrowest of margins, the Turkish elections remain formally inconclusive after the votes were counted on the early morning of May 15, with the prospect of a runoff election between the incumbent President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and his principal challenger, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, scheduled for May 28.

At this time Erdoğan seems almost certain to prevail, having secured 49.5% of the vote in the first round as opposed to Kılıçdaroğlu who managed to gain 44.9% support from the 64 million Turks who voted, an impressive 88.9% of eligible voters.

The main reason Erdoğan's prospects look so favorable, aside from his being so close to the 50% + 1 votes needed to win in round one, is that the previously obscure third presidential candidate, Sinan Ogan, who won a surprisingly large 5.1% of the first round vote and is not on the ballot in the runoff, appealed to voters by stressing his ultra-nationalist, anti-refugee credentials. Ogan denounced reconciliation moves with the large Kurdish minority as tantamount to an embrace of Kurdish separatism and terrorist tactics. He insisted that over three million refugees be sent home to Syria.

Ogan's brand of unitary nationalism is leading most knowledgeable observers in Turkey to assume that Erdoğan will receive most of the votes that went to Ogan in the first round. At the same time, Ogan's support contains elements of uncertainty, including preconditions he asks be set forth in a protocol signed by the presidential candidates who seek his backing. In addition to his policy priorities, Ogan seems to be conditioning his support on being assured of a political position in whatever government emerges from the runoff. In at least in one respect, Erdoğan is likely reluctant to agree to such an unconventional deal because Ogan presents himself as an ardent Kemalist supporter of secularism.

Ogan faults Kılıçdaroğlu even more pointedly, blaming him for diluting secularism and Kemalism, as well as lamenting his failure to win the trust of the Turkish people as a true champion of nationalism, which turned out to be the core issue of the campaign. Under these circumstances, it seems reasonable to suppose that the majority of those who voted for Ogan would shift their vote to Erdoğan even without a clear signal to do so. Ogan's campaign publicity puts himself in front of a gigantic portrait of Kemal Atatürk implying that only he among the candidates has kept faith with the legacy of the founding leader of the Turkish republic. Yet those who follow Turkish politics have learned that what seems reasonable doesn't always happen in there, so it is best to wait until the runoff to learn better if the Ogan's voters really have much political leverage, and if so, how it will be exerted.

On balance it seems that even if Erdoğan refrains from a commitment to and from Ogan, it is sensible to anticipate that at least some of his backers would either not vote or vote for Erdoğan. It is almost impossible to imagine a plausible political scenario in which Kılıçdaroğlu rises from the ashes of an expected defeat to an electoral victory don May 28th. Yet in politics as in life sometimes the impossible happens. Despite these indicators of an assured Erdoğan victory, it may not turn out that way. There is some chance that Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) will feel over-confident, and fail to mobilize their base as effectively as they did on May 14. Also, a shift in tone is already evident, as Western governments adjust their expectations to the highly probable reality that Erdoğan will soon be elected to serve a third five year term. This could undermine the earlier argument that Europe and the U.S. were working behind the scenes for Erdoğan's defeat, with the effect of making the acute economic and corruption concerns influence enough AKP voters to switch to Kılıçdaroğlu or not bother voting. Balancing these factors, are finger-pointing by the various members of the Table of Six opposition coalition, attributing their poorer than predicted showing by putting forward the wrong candidates for the Presidency, failing to make a strong enough case that this time around returning a secularist leadership to Ankara who would, unlike past secularists, will not interfere with the religious life of devout Muslims, and not being convincing enough about Turkish nationalism taking precedence over Kurdish minority rights including a hard line on the PKK and ISIS terrorism, and finally, not effectively

denouncing Erdoğan's militarization of Turkish civil society by instituting oppressive state/society relations.

Given the pre-election hype outside of Turkey to the effect that the opposition is mounting a strong challenge to Erdoğan's autocracy, which was touted as making this 'the most important election of the year,' as well as a test of the resilience of liberal democracy in the face of oppressive tactics, the relative silence outside of Turkey since May 14th is somewhat puzzling. Is it a matter of a sullen Western reaction to disappointment diverting attention from its faulty pre-election assessments, or were the 'deep states' in the U.S. and Europe not unhappy all along with an Erdoğan win, despite the public demeanor put forth by these governments of muting their hopes for Kılıçdaroğlu out of fear that it would provoke a nationalist backlash helpful to Erdoğan. While campaigning Erdoğan played this nationalism card skillfully, reminding Turks that Western preferences for his opposition amounted to an improper interference in the political life of the country. This pushback fit well with the unitary nationalism of Erdoğan's anti-Kurdish alliance with the dominant nationalist party in Turkey (MHP) and pleased as well small right-wing parties and conservative religious tendencies. Such an outlook contrasted with the emphasis of the opposition on pluralist democracy, which likely was decoded by many Turks as gesturing toward accommodation with Kurdish aspirations for minority rights and a greater degree of autonomy in those parts of the country where they were the majority ethnicity.

To the extent there has been serious analysis of the May 14th results the emphasis has been on Erdoğan embodying Turkish nationalism in a centralized and coercive form than Kılıçdaroğlu, and this issue of collective identity outweighing the economic failures of Erdoğan leadership, as well as the opposition's allegations of widespread corruption along with well-evidenced practice of repressing critics, including journalists. In effect, that the election was won not by the materialist criteria of the liberal democracies (remember Bill Clinton's campaign slogan, 'it's the economy, stupid!') but by the side that achieved greater credibility according to the illiberal criteria of embracing ethnic nationalism and religiosity.

Ongoing economic hardships have had a far greater impact on the urban working and middle classes than on rural populations living in the large interior Anatolian heartland of Turkey. Throughout his political career Erdoğan has always won by large majorities in Anatolia and many small towns while often doing poorly in the large cities. This election was not different. Even in the recently devastated Earthquake region, despite the failure of the government to respond in timely fashion, most affected citizens believed that there is only one leader that promised and possessed the ability to deliver housing and that was Erdoğan whom they supported. In so doing they ignored the almost total agreement among Turks that governmental irresponsibility magnified the tragedy, taking the forms of the non-implementation of building codes and an inept slow response to the earthquakes widely blamed for increasing devastation and suffering, which included over 50,000 deaths.

In this sense, the 2023 Turkish elections were more about nationalism than democracy, and it was the wishful thinking within the anti-Erdogan echo chamber to suppose otherwise, by which is meant that in a polarized society there is little dialogue except among the likeminded. Opposed sides tend to hear only views confirming their values and hopes, while demonizing those that dissent. Media platforms in the West played a part, being overly influenced by the more articulate and congenial views of anti-Erdogan voices in the Turkish diaspora, which highlighted democracy as the principal stake in the political rivalry.

This was misleading in several respects. To begin with, Erdoğan should be thought of as a kind of ‘democrat,’ but one who increasingly opted for the harsh policies and practices of an illiberal democracy in coping with critics. He never outright rejected democracy, and on the contrary gave it his own spin. During the 20 years of his leadership few obstacles littered the path of so-called ‘procedural democracy’ in Turkey, including his still untested, yet clearly announced, readiness to accept defeat and transfer governmental authority peacefully. Countries in the so-called Biden constructed alliance of democracy, such as India and Israel, are accepted as ‘democracies’ despite flagrantly abusive human rights records. A more substantive view of the nature of democracy has never held doctrinal sway even in ‘liberal democracies’ where racism, anti-immigration exclusionary policies, extreme poverty, and a heritage of slavery, genocide, and colonialism. Despite this historical record, the glorification of American exceptionalism remained the virtually unchallenged national narrative in mainstream.

Until recently the U.S. never doubted that it was a democracy, indeed an exemplary model of democracy because it had fair elections, peaceful transfers of power, and possessed a constitution allocating authority to the various branches of government. Serious doubts have arisen as a result of Trump trying in 2020 to undermine both the electoral process and the peaceful transfer of power, and narrowly missed succeeding. During his presidential term, which started in 2017 Trump exhibited contempt for fundamental constitutional verities such as an independent judiciary and separation of powers, seeking above all to be a one-man show that reshaped democratic normalcy.

Indeed, if as expected, Erdoğan goes on to win and continues as President of Turkey, it raises disturbing questions about whether democracy is after all the best solution for the governance of all societies. There is much written about whether there is reason to trust political leaders to abide by the rule of law in their governing style, but little about whether a majority of the citizenry is willing to impose standards of electoral accountability on a leadership even when it shown to have been repressive, corrupt, and incompetent. Is not this one troubling interpretation of the unexpected outcome in the Turkish elections? Can ‘democracy’ work if the citizenry are not vigilant in rejecting those who defy their most basic rights or show themselves vulnerable to demagogues with little respect for minimum moral and legal standards? Can free elections ever make the choice of fascism legitimate? Looking back on

the history of democracy it is notable that in ancient Athens such remarkable advocates of humane and moderate governance, as Plato, Aristotle, and Thucydides turned against democracy as a preferred mode of governance. Athenian democracy was blamed for causing this great city-state to decline by demagogues who stirred the citizens to demand overseas undertaking that exceeded Athenian capabilities.

For some of us, more disturbing than Erdogan's success, is the evidence from the election returns that extreme rightist forces are gaining public support in Turkey, making the prospect of a turn toward ultra-nationalism a real threat in the future. The main right-wing political and religious forces or allied with the AKP were big winners in the parallel Parliamentary elections on the 14th, besides taking credit for Erdoğan's better than expected showing. In other words, the stakes in the Turkish election were not only the quality of Turkish democracy, but the greater menace of a reactionary future for the country, which accentuates state centralism, infringements on human rights, and an exclusionary nationalism that banishes refugees and punishes critics.

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