Report

Turkey’s Local Elections:
Context, Meaning and Future Scenarios

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16 April 2014
Abstract
Turkey left behind its referendum-like local elections. The context and meaning of the elections led it to occur in a highly tense and severe atmosphere. By receiving 45.5 percent electoral support, the governing AK Party emerged victorious from the election. The AK Party’s victory will bear a significant impact on the course of the struggle with the Gülen Movement, the upcoming presidential elections, and the Kurdish peace process.

Introduction
Turkey left behind its referendum-like local elections held on 30 March 2014. According to unofficial results, (1) the governing AK Party received around 45.5 percent of the vote, whereas the main opposition Republican People Party (CHP), the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), and the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) respectively received 27.8, 15.2, and 6.1 percent of the vote. (2)
### Parties Comparative Performance in 2009 and 2014 Local Elections

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Parties</th>
<th>Percentage of votes</th>
<th>City/Provinces</th>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Percentage of votes</th>
<th>City/Provinc e</th>
<th>Districts</th>
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<td>45</td>
<td>481</td>
<td>%45.5</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>587</td>
</tr>
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<td>CHP</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>%27.8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MHP</td>
<td>%16.1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>%15.2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>111</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pro-Kurdish DTP/BDP/HD P</td>
<td>%5.7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>%6.1</td>
<td>10[^3]</td>
<td>75</td>
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</table>

**Table I:** These figures were collected from NTV channel’s elections section [http://secim.ntv.com.tr/2014-verel-seçimleri/canlı-sonuç](http://secim.ntv.com.tr/2014-verel-seçimleri/canlı-sonuc)

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**What Does This Election Mean for Turkey?**

This election could not be easily characterized as a local election. Numerous factors and aspects of this election set it apart from previous local elections. No other local election in Turkey’s recent history has caused such controversy and received so much national and international coverage. Some analysts claimed that the outcome of this election would reveal the principles, values, and leadership that will shape Turkey’s future. (4) Different scenarios for Turkey and the ruling AK Party had been offered in the run-up to the local elections by the media and analysts depending on the level of support that each party, especially the governing AK Party, were expected to acquire. These scenarios were not pertained to municipal administration nor were they about local issues and governance. Rather, these scenarios involved whether the AK Party and Prime Minister Erdoğan would remain in the driving seat and chart Turkey’s direction.

The local elections were the first instance in a series of elections, the other two of which are presidential elections in August 2014 and general elections set for the first half of 2015. Hence, the local vote was seen as a rehearsal for the other two elections. In the last decade, the Kemalist establishment, which was a tutelary system, was defeated and the old system was shattered. However, the ‘new’ Turkey, a term which denotes putting a new system in place, has not yet been established. As stated above, the cadres and politics that will emerge victorious from these three elections will gain legitimacy and power to embark on building the ‘new’ Turkey. This was a feeling shared by both the government and the opposition. This mutually shared view was the primary factor that created a tense, highly-polarized, and contentious atmosphere in the run-up to the elections.
The Context of the Election

Furthermore, this election took place with a roiling summer of street protests and a fierce power struggle between the AK Party and the Gülen Movement in the background. These two instances represent the most formidable challenges to the AK Party’s 12-year rule. Many observers believed that these instances dealt a serious blow to the AK Party’s rule and Erdoğan’s dream of becoming Turkey’s first elected president with enhanced power.

The power struggle between the government and the Gülen Movement, which came to full public attention with the graft inquiry of 17 December, was expected to have a heavy toll on the AK Party government and Erdoğan’s personal career. Given that the challenge came from a highly hierarchical and well-organized group with a significant presence in the state apparatus and utilized sensitive issues such as corruption, wrong-doings, and supporting international terrorism, many believed that the AK Party and Erdoğan would not be able to weather this storm.

The constant allegations of corruption and leaking of voice recordings and video tapes of government officials and the prime minister’s close circle in the run-up to the elections were expected to turn the mood against the government. In such a context, it was a widely shared belief among opposition circles that this election would represent the beginning of the end of the AK Party and Erdoğan’s decade. This further heightened the already tense atmosphere in the country, deepened the social-political polarization, and turned the election into a referendum on Erdoğan and the AK Party government. Likewise, Erdoğan and the AK Party also portrayed this election in a similar manner. Erdoğan went so far as to claim that he was waging “the second war of independence” against an illicit coalition aiming to topple him and his government in order to render Turkey amenable to the wishes and interests of the powerful, internally and externally.(5)

The fact that the participation rate in this election stood at around 89 percent, which is one of the highest rates of participation in a local election in Turkey’s history, confirms the claim that this election had in fact acquired the aura and nature of a referendum. In this regard, Erdoğan referred to the electoral performance of the AK Party at the 2009 local elections (38.8 percent), as a benchmark to measure the AK Party’s performance in the 30 March local elections. Yet despite this claim, it was widely believed that the psychological threshold was set at 40 percent. (6) Any result above this number would have been regarded as a success. As such, it would have emboldened the party to move forward with its calculations vis-à-vis the presidential elections and Turkey’s general
politics, whereas any outcome below this figure would have been seen as a failure, necessitating a revision on these two accounts.

The Political Map Emerging From the Elections

By receiving 45.5 percent electoral support, the AK Party emerged victorious from the election. This victory not only culminated in the emergence of the below political map (see below), it also strengthened the party and Prime Minister’s position in pursuing their political goals. Besides the AK Party/Erdoğan’s victory, this map also clearly reveals the dynamics of Turkey’s current political situation and parties’ respective political performance.

Turkey’s 30 March 2014 Elections Results

As seen in the above map, the AK Party is the only party that appeals to all parts of Turkey. It has not only kept its traditional strongholds, but also added new places to its list. Even in places where it did not garner enough votes to win, it usually ranked second. In contrast, the CHP remained largely confined to the coastal parts of Turkey. As demonstrated in table I and the map, the number of municipalities run by the MHP decreased from ten to eight. Both parties are almost non-existent in the Kurdish dominated East and Southeast of Turkey.
The exception of this emerging picture of the opposition is the BDP’s performance. The BDP can be regarded as the second winner of this election. In comparison to the 2009 elections, it gained control of two new municipalities. If it wins the annulled election in the Ağrı province on 01 June, it will have won 11 provinces in the local elections. All in all, despite the Gezi Park protests and a sustained campaign of defamation that began with the 17 December operation, the opposition was unable to mount a significant challenge to the government. The AK Party has proven successful in eight successive elections by a wide margin.

The Election Results and Possible Implications
The AK Party’s victory in the local elections will bear a significant impact on the course of the struggle with the Gülen Movement, the upcoming presidential elections, and the Kurdish peace process.

Firstly, since the launch of the graft probe, the Gülen Movement, a religious or semi-religious organization with a significant presence in the state apparatus, was mostly proactive and offensive in the struggle against the AK Party government. It adopted a multifaceted strategy in this struggle. On the one hand, it orchestrated its bureaucratic presence within the state in order to launch sensational judicial operations against the government. On the other hand, it regularly leaked voice recordings and video tapes of the Prime Minister, other government officials and their close circles, irrespective of whether they were genuine or photomontages, to defame and turn the public against them. Lastly, it tried to appeal to Western audiences and decision-makers by spearheading a campaign to portray the government as supporting radical elements in Syria and the broader Middle East by leaking photos of government officials with individuals such as Yasin al Qadi, a contentious Saudi businessman, or disseminating news about Turkey’s intelligence organization’s alleged transfer of weapons to extremist groups in Syria.

In contrast, the ruling AK Party was rather reactive and defensive in this struggle until the local elections. It responded to the Gülen Movement’s bureaucratic assault by dismissing or reassigning thousands of police officers and judges, who were widely believed to be affiliated with the Movement. Moreover, it tried to reveal the wrongdoings and illegal activities of the Movement within the state structure. Yet, during this time, the government prioritized a victory in the local elections, hence focusing on its elections campaign, in order to initiate a head on and pro-active struggle against the Gülenists. With the success attained at the local elections, the government is expected
to take more vigorous actions against the Gülen Movement through legal and bureaucratic channels. In fact, the skeleton of Prime Minister Erdoğan’s “balcony speech” (7) was based on the struggle against the Movement. He repeated several lines from his speech to his first parliamentary group’s meeting after the elections. “The nation gave us a mandate for the ‘liquidation’ of the parallel state,” he declared, which mostly refers to the Gülen Movement’s presence within the state apparatus. “We will not have the slightest hesitation. We shall never forget the betrayal,” (8) he said. To complement this, the Interior Minister, Efkan Ala, stated that 180 investigations have been launched against the “parallel state,” most of which are related to the illegal wiretapping of thousands of people. (9)

Secondly, owing to the local election results, Erdoğan has strengthened his hand for the candidacy in the presidential elections. It is highly likely that he will run for the office and his post-election speeches confirm this point. Erdoğan was quoted as saying that “the president will be elected by the public for the first time, it’s important in this sense.” (10) "The responsibilities will be different after these elections. It will not be a president of protocol but one that sweats, runs around, works hard," (11) he said. As reflected in these sentences, Erdoğan is willing to both run for the presidential office and enhance its role and power in the system. While it seems that he will comfortably acquire enough support to become president, it is not yet clear whether the AK Party will be able change the constitution to strengthen the office’s power, since it requires either the support of 367 MPs to pass a constitutional change or 330 MPs’ signatures to put such an amendment to a referendum. At present, the AK Party has 317 MPs in the parliament,(12) thus falling short of meeting the requirement for either options on its own. It needs support from the opposition to do either. In the current climate, the only party that might offer its support is the pro-Kurdish BDP, depending on the evolution of the peace process. As such a move is not completely risk-free, it is not certain that Erdoğan will take this course even if he receives the BDP’s support for the constitutional amendment.

Thirdly, Erdoğan, during the election rallies, constantly emphasized that the Gülen Movement’s stifled coup attempt was not only aimed at toppling him, but also at derailing the peace process. He vowed to both hold the coup plotters accountable for their deeds and conclude the Kurdish peace process. He reiterated this line in his victory speech on election night by stating that “…the 2023 targets, the Resolution (peace) Process, the national unity and brotherhood have won.” This signals that the Kurdish peace process will take a high gear in the post-electoral period.
In the parliament's first session after the elections, the postponed National Intelligence Organization (MIT) draft-law was brought to the floor for deliberation. Among others, the proposed bill contains provisions to secure the ongoing peace process and negotiations with the incarcerated leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan. Moreover, the release of the 37 Kurdish activists in the Union of Kurdistan Communities’ (KCK) main case and eight others in the KCK’s media case on the eve of the elections (27 March) is a harbinger of further political and legal steps that the government may take to reinvigorate the peace process.

Both during the Gezi Park protests and the Gülen Movement’s bureaucratic assault against the government, Kurdish politicians, unlike other opposition parties, refused to join the anti-AK Party/Erdoğan coalition. Öcalan defined the process started with the graft probe as a coup attempt and pledged that he will not “pour fuel on the fire of the coup.” The Kurdish Movement’s stance on both instances strengthened the bond of trust between the government and Kurdish politicians, i.e. negotiating partners. Despite these growing bonds of trust and convergence on the broader parameters of a final resolution, both sides have different opinions vis-à-vis the nature and details of the negotiations and the final settlement. Bridging these differences poses a challenge to the process. All in all, the ground for further enhancement and reinvigoration of the peace process has been cleared by both the AK Party and BDP’s victories in the local elections.

Conclusion
Turkey underwent referendum-like local elections in a severe and polluted atmosphere. The ruling AK Party emerged victorious, while the opposition failed to take advantage of the socio-political atmosphere ushered in by the Gezi Park protests and the struggle between the government and the Gülen Movement. The results have helped the AK Party and Erdoğan stand strong in the run-up to the presidential elections, the struggle against the Gülen Movement and to continue with the Kurdish Peace Process.

However, this does not mean that conflicts and tension are over. The fact that this election took place in such a tense and polarizing climate is because it was seen as a rehearsal for the upcoming presidential and general elections. The prospect of the AK Party and Erdoğan remaining at the helm of Turkey, charting the country’s directions, and building a ‘new’ Turkey in their own image are the primary factors that animated anti-government individuals to take to the streets and the Gülen Movement-CHP bloc to launch such a vigorous defamation campaign to bring the government down. As the presidential election nears, it is likely that the political atmosphere will again become severe and tense. Erdoğan and the AK Party should demonstrate political dexterity and
skill to manage such a political atmosphere in order to complete Turkey’s election marathon with minimal costs.

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Endnotes

(1) The official result has not yet been announced by the YSK.


(3) In Ağrı province, the BDP candidate won according to multiple counts, yet the AK Party’s candidate complained to the YSK about miscounting and wrongdoings in the elections. The YSK annulled the election there and set a new date, 01 June 2014, for elections. If BDP wins it again, it will have won 11 provinces.


(7) Balcony Speeches denotes speeches given by the Prime Minister Erdoğan from the balcony of the AK Party’s headquarter after each election victory.


(11) Ibid.

