

## Position Paper

# Erdogan and the Turkish Presidency

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**Turkey's President Abdullah Gul and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan [Reuters]**

## Abstract

There are several scenarios proposed as analysts examine Turkey's upcoming presidential race. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) recently enjoyed a victory in local elections, and it is highly likely that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan will capitalize on this victory by running for Turkey's presidency in August. This is the first time in the Turkish republic's history that the president will be elected by a direct vote of the people rather than by the parliament. This paper addresses several questions that would follow any announcement by Erdogan stating his intention to run for the presidency. First, there is the question of Gul's fate if Erdogan will run for the presidency and whether or not some type of deal will be negotiated on the exchange of roles between the two. Second, there is a question of whether or not Erdogan will win the presidency in the first round of voting or be forced to a second round of voting in which all opposition parties will rally behind a single candidate. Finally, there is a question of what kind of president Erdogan will be if he wins and the nature of the presidency Turkey will see in the coming years.

## Introduction

It is highly likely current head of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan will run for Turkey's presidency in August. The upcoming election will mark the first time in the Turkish republic's history the president is elected by a direct vote of the people rather than by a majority of parliament.

Erdogan and Abdullah Gul, the country's current president, are faced with a number of choices, particularly because Gul is also a leading AKP founder. It is widely expected that Erdogan will announce his intention to compete for the presidency this month, but that does not negate the fact that he has several other options. He can avoid running for presidency and instead opt to retain prime minister status until the 2015 parliamentary elections. He can also wait until his party amends procedural rules that would allow members of parliament more than three terms, opening the door for Erdogan to remain prime minister for four more years after the 2015 elections. However, Erdogan has continually refused to amend party rules and a poll in mid-April showed that a majority of AKP members want to nominate him for the presidency.

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### Exchange of roles

Somewhat stormy local elections were held in Turkey on 30 March 2014 resulting in a clear victory for the AKP. Turkey's political agenda has turned to the August presidential elections – the public is waiting for Erdogan and Gul to plan for the future. Some observers who believe Erdogan will run for president anticipate a deal in which Gul and Erdogan will swap positions, similar to the manner in which Russia's Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev switched roles in Russia. According to the last constitutional amendment, Gul has the right to run for office once again, and he is still politically active, so it is not expected he will retire after his term ends. Thus, if Erdogan runs for presidency, it is clear it will be a result of Gul's approval and there is an implication that he should be rewarded for giving up his right to run for the presidency again.

There is also consensus both within and outside the AKP that the party will encounter difficulty in finding a leader to fill Erdogan's position if he leaves. Since Gul has previous experience as prime minister (several months in late 2002 through early 2003), he is regarded as the most capable man to maintain party unity and popularity in the next few years.

The two men have met several times since 30 March 2014, including the day after the local elections. Dialogue on the presidential election continues within the party. When a

reporter asked Gul about the Russian exchange scenario for Turkey on 19 April, he responded that it was not an appropriate model for Turkey. This response left the situation open – Gul has not announced that he will retire, but he also knows Erdogan will not be a mere symbolic or ceremonial president and has sought a constitutional amendment to enhance presidential powers. Thus, if the exchange were to occur, Gul is aware he will not have sufficient freedom to manage the country's affairs as he desires given Erdogan's strong political personality.

The exchange scenario, then, is unlikely, but cannot be totally dismissed. Another scenario could be that Gul exits the Turkish political arena to assume an international position. AKP circles are considering whether or not any of the current party's ministers could assume the position of prime minister. For example, Ahmet Davutoglu, the foreign minister, has recently emerged as the strongest candidate to succeed Erdogan because he has worked closely with Erdogan, is highly competent and has no opponents within the party.

### One or two election rounds?

The AKP's vote share was slightly less in this year's parliamentary elections compared to 2011. The approximately five per cent decrease has raised speculations that Erdogan may fail to achieve an absolute majority in the first round of the presidential election, meaning he may have to contest a second round with a candidate supported by all opposition parties. In other words, Erdogan's presidency is not guaranteed.

Turkey's national parliamentary elections follow a proportional representation system, but they are not a full measure of local support for political parties and their leaders. Thus, it is important to examine how the AKP has performed in the three local elections it has contested since it came to power. The first was in 2004, the second in 2009 and the last and most recent March 2014. In 2004, its local election vote share was forty-one per cent, thirty-nine per cent in 2009 and forty-six per cent in 2014. The AKP is only the second party in the history of the multi-party system to achieve such a large proportion of the vote in Turkey's local elections, preceded only by the Justice Party (led by Suleyman Demirel) after the 1960 coup. However, less than forty per cent of the electorate voted in the Justice Party's case, while eighty-nine per cent of the electorate voted in this year's local elections.

The 30 March elections are characterised by several other factors relating to Erdogan's presidential prospects. First, the AKP is the only party which had nationwide grassroots support – other parties only had support from one or two major districts, while the AKP had support from all five major districts. Second, the AKP increased its vote share in all but seven of the country's 81 major cities. Third, the AKP's 46 per cent victory in

comparison to the country's other parties is significant. The Republican People's Party (CHP) came in second place with 27.6 per cent of the vote, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) came in third with 15.2 per cent and the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party in fourth with 4.2 per cent. The remaining votes went to independents and small non-Islamist parties. This is an opportunity for Erdogan to garner several million more votes from supporters of the smaller parties in a future presidential bid.

In actuality, the likelihood that Erdogan will win in the first round of the presidential election is quite high. It is likely that the opposition parties, especially the CHP and nationalist parties, will not be able to agree on a joint candidate, meaning that Islamist, conservative and the vast majority of Kurdish votes will go to Erdogan. In the highly unlikely event the election goes to a second round, the parties will probably not be able to control their supporters' votes and it will be difficult to mobilize CHP and MHP supporters behind a single candidate.

### **Presidential election a challenge regardless of winner**

When Erdogan was asked in an interview what type of president he would be, his response was that he would be a president who sweats. This implies he will be a working and active president rather than just a symbolic leader. He will represent the state's sovereignty and promote a form of reconciliation between state authorities. However, it is important to mention that the next presidential election will pose a significant constitutional and political dilemma for the Turkish Republic, regardless of the winning candidate. If the president wishes to extend his executive powers, as Erdogan has indicated he will do, the dilemma will be even greater.

While it is difficult for any party to achieve a majority of more than fifty per cent, if this happens it would effectively mean that Turkey chose a president which will enjoy widespread legitimacy but limited powers. The legislature ignored this dilemma when it amended the presidential election system, perhaps deeming the amendment would be followed by another constitutional amendment to redistribute power between the president and the prime minister. But the attempt to write a new constitution for Turkey, establishing a joint presidential-parliamentarian system, did not achieve the desired outcome, and the multi-party Convergence Commission failed to reach agreement on a new draft constitution last year.

This leaves the question of what the most appropriate course of action is at this time. One expectation is that if Erdogan becomes president, he will fully exercise the current powers of the presidency, including presiding over the Council of Ministers (a right that former presidents had not exercised). Also, he will rely on his close relationship with the incoming prime minister on the one hand, and his political and moral capital on the



other, to influence the major decisions of the government and the country. A second possibility is that the AKP government will introduce a limited constitutional amendment to redistribute power between the prime minister and the president, subject to a referendum, since it is difficult to get parliamentary approval for such a move. The third possibility is that the current government will change the current parliamentary election system to a constituency-based system (similar to the British model), which could add fifty to seventy parliamentary seats in the AKP's favour, allowing the AKP to enjoy a two-thirds majority in parliament after the 2015 elections. It would then be possible for the AKP-dominated parliament to approve a completely new constitution, including amendment of the government system without having to resort to a referendum, the result of which cannot be guaranteed.

## Conclusion

Erdogan is likely to become the president after August; however, it is not yet clear who will replace him even though Ahmet Davutoglu's chances are strengthening. The uncertainty in Turkey is not good for the country's financial and economic development, and any transition under such circumstances and of such large magnitude will not be simple or without disruption. The recent political conflict in the country will have an impact on the country for the foreseeable future as opposition parties and central authorities continue to deal with each other on the basis of suspicion and paranoia. These parties and authorities will not easily concede to an Erdogan-led presidency for five or perhaps ten years nor will they easily accept constitutional amendments extending executive powers, leaving Turkey's political future uncertain until matters relating to the presidency are resolved.

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