

Position Paper

Turkish Local Elections: Background, Results and Implications

*This paper was originally written in Arabic by: **Al Jazeera Center for Studies***

Translated into English by:

7 April 2014





[AlJazeera]

Abstract

Turkey's local elections were held Sunday, March 30, 2014 under what can be considered turbulent political circumstances. These elections were key for a number of reasons: they were the third ones in which the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) participated in since its ascent to power in 2002, the large margin by which the AKP won and finally, because a great number of regional and international players considered the elections a test of the AKP and its president's worthiness and benefit. Presidential elections will also be held in August of this year, and current leader of the AKP and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan will continue to face challenges given a severely polarised political atmosphere in the country. This is particularly true given that the presidential position he strives for is seen in Turkey's political culture as a unifying national position distant from partisan squabbles.

Introduction

Turkey's local elections were held Sunday, March 30, 2014 under what can be considered turbulent political circumstances. These elections were key for a number of reasons: they were the third ones in which the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) participated in since its ascent to power in 2002, the large margin by which the AKP won and finally, because a great number of regional and international players considered the elections a test of the AKP and its president's worthiness and benefit. Presidential elections will also be held in August of this year, and current Prime Minister and leader of the AKP Recep Tayyip Erdogan will continue to face challenges as a result

of the severely polarised political atmosphere in the country. This is particularly true given that the presidential position he strives for is seen in Turkey's political culture as a unifying national position distant from partisan squabbles. This paper analyses the political background that affected these elections, their outcomes and further implications.

Escalation of political struggle

Adnan Menderes' final months in power saw his opponents increasingly convinced they could not overthrow him through elections. A similar feeling has been evoked in Turkey by the AKP's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's electoral victories. The opposition, fearful of Erdogan's possible presidential victory, mobilised to oust him by other means, including surveillance and accusations of corruption beginning December 17, 2013. This created an unprecedented atmosphere of political polarisation in Turkey until elections last week, shifting the focus from local development and organizational issues to a referendum on the future of the country, state and ruling regime.

While the conservative Fethullah Gulen movement was previously a close ally of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), it was the key impetus behind attempts to overthrow Erdogan by using its widespread influence in prosecutorial, justice and police ranks. Electorally, Fethullah Gulen leadership instructed their followers in all 81 Turkish provinces to vote for the AKP's main opponent, the Republican People's Party (CHP). The CHP is seen as a defender of the country's secularist principles and had often criticised the growing influence of the Gulen movement. However, before the elections, the CHP and Gulen movement held a reconciliation speech. In response, Erdogan accused the Gulen movement of forming a parallel state and threatening the country's safety and security.

While it was not clear before election day if this clash would have an impact on voting patterns in the country, it was clear that opposition parties considered the elections a vote on the AKP's right to continue ruling and Erdogan's right to run for president in August. The AKP entered elections relying on their economic record and accomplishments and considered the elections a vote on their country's security and stability as well as how their vote share in local elections would compare to past local elections.

Resounding victory and widespread growth

There are 81 municipalities in Turkey, 30 of which are considered metropolises or large cities. In the 2009 local elections, there were only 16 metropolises, a number parliamentary legislation later increased. The number of eligible voters in Turkey is 52

million people. In the previous local elections, the AKP won 38.8 per cent of the votes, winning in 47 municipalities, including greater Istanbul and the capital Ankara, the two largest cities in the country. However, the AKP lost in Izmir, a stronghold of the CHP and the third largest city in the country, as well as Antalya, a coastal city. The results of the 2009 election indicated that the CHP still controlled coastal cities, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) has influence in northern, eastern and coastal areas, and that the Peace and Democracy Party (the BDP, closely affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK) was the AKP's main opposition Kurdish majority areas. Even given all of this, the AKP was the only party capable of winning across the country in 2009.

The AKP has won the three parliamentary and two local elections it has participated in since it came to power. It has gathered less of the vote share in local elections given the role ballot choices and candidates' personalities play at that level. The party's leaders had stated in the media that a vote share large than 38.8 per cent (the 2009 vote share) would be a victory for them before the most recent election, but the truth is that the AKP was hoping to win over 42 per cent of the vote share to offer it as conclusive evidence that the campaign to smear the party failed. The party had also aimed to win over half of the 30 largest metropolises, increasing the number it controls over the ones won in the last election. While Izmir was an unfathomable win, the AKP sought to break the CHP's control over coastal cities in this election by winning either Manisa or Antalya.

On the morning of March 31, after 98 per cent of the ballots had been counted (and prior to any official announcement), the results indicated the AKP won 46 per cent of the vote share, the CHP won 28 per cent, the MHP won 15 per cent and the BDP won 6 per cent. The AKP and CHP increased their vote share as compared to the last local elections, while the latter two parties lost ground.

The 46 per cent is significant for yet another reason. Save for one local election in the 1960s when only 40 per cent of voters participated, this was the first time a Turkish party won 46 per cent of the vote. Not only that, 80 per cent of the Turkish people turned out to vote in this election, making the outcome doubly historic. The CHP also failed in its goal to minimise the AKP's influence among Kurdish voters.

The AKP now has control over 49 of the 81 municipalities and over half of the 30 large cities, including Istanbul and Ankara. The CHP now controls 13 municipalities, the MHP controls 8 and the BDP controls 9. While an AKP candidate lost to a popular Kurdish figure, Ahmet Turk, in Mardin, the AKP achieved a tangible victory in a number of Kurdish majority areas as well winning Mus for the first time.

The CHP retained its Izmir headquarters, but the AKP took back Antalya from its key opposition, breaking the CHP's control of the Mediterranean and Aegean coastal cities.

Another first-time win for the AKP was northern Ordu, pushing the CHP off the map in eastern and north-eastern Turkish provinces.

Finally, the CHP's loss of Tunceli to the BDP was quite shocking given that it is the birthplace of its leader. Despite expectations that most votes in Erzurum, Fethullah Gulen's hometown, would go to the CHP, the AKP achieved a comfortable lead in the conservative city.

Short and long-term implications

Opposition parties and the Gulen movement made a key mistake by transforming routine local elections into a battle over the country's identity and its future. This provoked the average Turkish voter to defend the country and its stability by granting Erdogan an unprecedented victory in local elections. It was no secret that Erdogan and party leaders saw this election's results not only as the fruits of their labour or due to the electoral promises they made, but also indication of a renewal of trust in their party and their government's policies. This will have a profound impact on the Turkish political scene in the upcoming weeks and months.

This victory paves the way for Erdogan's government to do several things. First, it will likely move quickly to rid the country of the "state within the state," meaning the Gulen movement and its widespread influence in government bodies. Legislative steps will be taken toward rebuilding state authorities and cancelling others, as well as redefining intergovernmental relations. The AKP realizes that they must find a way to tame the Ataturk bureaucratic and military elite, a group that has always believed it owns the country. Events leading to the elections indicate exactly to what extent these elites will go to in order to control the government and obstruct the ruling party's work. This is a major challenge for the AKP as presidential elections near.

After such electoral outcomes, it is now certain that Recep Tayyip Erdogan will run for presidential elections in August. Most of the prime minister's inner circle saw that a loss in the municipal elections would be the only thing stopping Erdogan from running in the presidential elections – and that is what the opposition had believed would happen.

It is likely that there will soon be a meeting between Erdogan and Abdullah Gul to discuss their respective futures, who will be appointed interim prime minister after Erdogan resigns from parliament and future parliamentary elections.

Given that Erdogan was slated as the strongest candidate for president, it is not unlikely that turmoil will continue in Turkey, perhaps even more alarmingly than even the last few months. This will continue until the country's president is chosen. Whatever occurs

in the next few months, one thing is clear: Erdogan will continue to face challenges, regardless of reforms by the government as well as steps it will take to contain threats.

The domestic stakes for these elections were high; however, it is just as important to note the high international stakes. This clear win for Erdogan forces Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, Iran and other international forces, such as the US, Germany and Russia, to reconsider their calculations of a Turkey without Erdogan.

Copyright © 2014 Al Jazeera Center for Studies, All rights reserved.

Al Jazeera Center for Studies

