

Position Paper

Turkey's Next President: Contenders and Calculations

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Two key contenders for the Turkish presidency, Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu (left) and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan (right) [AP]

Abstract

Turkey's presidential elections on 10 August 2014 will not only be the country's first direct election for the presidency, but also the first election with no candidate from the traditional Kemalist party. There are currently three candidates in the running: Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, jointly nominated by the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), and Salahuddin Dimirtash, co-chair of the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP).

Introduction

In early July 2014, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced his expected candidacy for the Turkish presidency in the presence of hundreds of members of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). A few days prior to that, the two opposition parties, the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), announced their joint candidate, Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, the former secretary-general of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. This was followed by an announcement of the Kurdish candidate, Salahuddin Dimirtash, co-chair of the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). Now that the candidates are clear, other questions have emerged in the Turkish political sphere. This paper addresses the meaning of the joint nomination of Dr. Ihsanoglu by the two opposition parties, whether or not Erdogan will be able to achieve victory in this election battle as he did in the local elections, whether or not the presidential election will go to a run-off and the type of president Erdogan will

be if he is elected by a majority vote of the people (rather than by a parliamentary majority as has been the case for Turkey's previous presidents).

Contenders

There are two firsts for this Turkish presidential election. It will be the country's first direct election for president, and it will also be the first time no candidate from the traditional Kemalist party is in the race for president.

Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, the first candidate to announce his campaign, was born in Cairo in 1943. He was educated at Ain Shams and al-Azhar universities before returning to Turkey in the early seventies, where he obtained his doctorate from the University of Ankara. Dr. Ihsanoglu was gradually promoted in academia and was president of the University of Istanbul's History of Science Department from 1984 to 2003.

In 2004, Erdogan's government nominated Dr. Ihsanoglu, who has close ties with Arab and Islamic circles, as secretary-general of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. He assumed this post from January 2005 to January 2014 with political and diplomatic support provided by Erdogan and his government. Dr. Ihsanoglu's relationship with Erdogan's government became strained during 2013 because of his unwillingness to condemn the military coup in Egypt and because he took a position closer to that of the pro-coup Gulf Arab states. The conflict between Dr. Ihsanoglu's foreign alliances and Turkish public opinion may reduce his chances of winning the presidential race.

The second candidate is the prime minister and head of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Born in Istanbul in 1954, Erdogan received his primary education at the Imam Khateeb Islamic School and then a bachelor's degree in economics and commerce from the University of Marmara. Erdogan began his political activism during his university years, when he joined the anti-Marxist National Turkish Students Federation. Erdogan also became an active member in the Islamic-oriented National Salvation Party, founded by Nejmeddin Erbakan in the early seventies. He remained faithful to Erbakan, serving as a prominent member of the parties founded by Erbakan for more than a quarter of a century. In 1994, Erdogan won Istanbul's municipal elections and chaired its municipal council throughout the next four years, a period which heralded immense progress in services and systems for Istanbul, the largest city in Turkey and its commercial and industrial hub. This mayoral experience shaped Erdogan's political personality in the national Turkish consciousness.

During 1999, Erdogan was tried and convicted for reciting a poem at a public meeting in the city of Sirte two years earlier. He was imprisoned for several months and denied from running for any political office for five years. By 2001, Erdogan was convinced that

the approach and political programme of Erdogan would not enable him to win the support of the popular majority. This led Erdogan and a number of his friends to establish the AKP. At the end of the following year, the AKP won a landslide victory in the 2002 parliamentary elections. With a majority of over two-thirds of parliamentary seats, the party was able to form the government alone. Abdullah Gul assumed the position of prime minister until Erdogan was able to run and win a parliamentary seat in a special election. Since 2003, Erdogan has led the AKP government and it has won in nine successive rounds of elections, including parliamentary and local elections and referendums on two sets of major constitutional amendments.

Today, Erdogan's reputation is a tribute to the great revitalization he achieved for Turkey during eleven years of government leadership and for the active foreign policy pursued by his government. This has made him the most influential figure in the history of the Turkish Republic since the time of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. However, the strong prime minister has faced difficult challenges during the past year, starting with popular protests organised by opposition forces in Taksim Square last summer and continuing with the breakup of the AKP and the Gulen group, accused of trying to take control of the Turkish state.

The third presidential candidate is Salahuddin Dimirtash, co-chair of the Kurdish nationalism-oriented Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). This party has close ties to the banned Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) which had fought battles against the Turkish state starting in the mid-eighties before it stopped armed action and participated in the National Peace and Reform Initiative launched by Erdogan two years ago. Dimirtash was born in Palo Alzg in eastern Turkey in 1973 and studied law at the University of Ankara. In 2007, he became a member of the Turkish parliament representing the city of Diyarbakir, under the banner of the Democratic Society Party, which subsequently became the BDP. In 2010, Dimirtash became co-chairman of the party and in the following year, he emerged as a leader in the Kurdish civil disobedience movement which was inspired by the Egyptian revolution's traditions. Besides being the youngest candidate, Dimirtash's background as a Kurdish nationalist makes him an unfavourable candidate. It is not expected that this party will get more than 6 per cent of the vote in the first round of the race, necessarily disqualifying them from a run-off.

Calculations: facing Erdogan versus betting on him

The opposition parties who jointly nominated Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu were looking at the 30 March 2014 local elections results, in which the AKP won nearly forty-six per cent of the vote. They are projecting this would not be enough for Erdogan to win the presidential race outright in the first round and would be forced to a run-off, giving the opposition a chance to improve its image among Kurdish voters or persuade them not to

vote in a run-off. As a university professor and former secretary-general of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Dr. Ihsanoglu is not a Kemalist, but is known as a conservative who maintains good relations within Islamic circles inside and outside Turkey while emphasizing his commitment to secularism and to Atatürk's legacy.

As for Dimirtash, the calculations vary slightly. He realizes that he has little hope of victory in a first, much less second round. Since the Kurdish peace process' launch and the Erdogan government's unprecedented measures towards Turkey's official recognition of Kurds as a group with national and cultural demands, the majority of Kurds recognise that achieving their goals is linked to the AKP government and to Erdogan's courage in particular. Thus, neither the MHP nor the CHP are attractive to the Kurds. However, Kurdish national leaders still see that it is in their strategic interest to distribute their votes among the three candidates and prevent an outright victory for Erdogan in the first round.

For Erdogan's campaign, calculations are based on the need to win the race in the first round, taking into account several issues:

1. Different voter considerations in local versus national elections –local level issues are different than issues which impact the entire country's future.
2. The AKP has always been the largest party in predominantly Kurdish provinces. Many Kurds will not respond to political pressure, rather giving their initial vote to those they believe will protect the peace process.
3. Votes that went to candidates of small Islamic parties in local elections will most likely be redirected in Erdogan's favour in the presidential race.
4. Erdogan's electoral campaign is based on the premise that the next president, being elected directly by the people, will not be a ceremonial figure but rather an active president who takes into account both citizen and state interests. Erdogan has a long-standing political record while his main rival is a relative newcomer to the Turkish political scene. As Erdogan said in a speech in the city of Samson on 6 July, "I have not come to politics from space".

The new law passed in parliament on 10 July 2014 in relation to the Kurdish peace process confirms the AKP's commitment to move the process forward and could be a vote-winner for Erdogan's presidential bid. Equally important in revealing Erdogan's intentions is the AKP's presidential programme, announced on 12 July 2014 and in which Erdogan committed himself to developing a new constitution changing the governmental structure and distribution of power.

Ultimately, it is certain that Erdogan's victory in the first round would give him a moral mandate to put his conception of the presidency into effect, regardless of who succeeds him as prime minister. Failure to achieve this victory will make him less ambitious in changing the president's role and the checks and balances between the president and his prime minister.

Next president, next prime minister?

The mandate of Turkey's current president, Abdullah Gul, ends on 28 August 2014. If Erdogan wins, he will step down from his position as prime minister. If he loses, he will have a choice between resigning or completing his term as prime minister. Whatever the outcome, Turkey will enter a new era after the August presidential or the spring run-off next year, should it be necessary.

Assuming Erdogan wins, President Gul must name a new prime minister before the end of his mandate. Along with Erdogan's presidential campaign, the AKP is now also occupied with this question. A number of ministers and senior figures within the party, such as Bulent Arinc and Bashir Otalaa, believe they should appoint an interim prime minister until Abdullah Gul is convinced to return to political work. Gul would then be nominated as the AKP's president during its conference slated for October 2014, and would lead the party into the 2015 parliamentary elections. If the AKP wins the parliamentary elections, Gul would become prime minister. The problem with this scenario is that the majority of Gul supporters are leaders who will not be able to contest the 2015 parliamentary elections due to the party's procedural rule which prevents anyone from occupying a parliamentary seat for more than three consecutive terms. It is also likely that many of them will retire from politics due to age considerations. If the AKP leans towards this option, the interim prime minister's character would not be significant or subject to considerable debate, as he would only lead the party and the government for a few months.

A second scenario is that the AKP will face very different tasks from those faced in the Erdogan era. While the priority over the past decade has been to demolish the old system and save the country from its grip, the priority during the next phase should be to build new state institutions. In other words, the party needs new, young leadership, and Abdullah Gul would not qualify on these grounds. Moreover, in matters of both internal and foreign policy, Gul has been inclined to preserve his image and his relationships at the expense of adopting necessary policies. Advocates of this option believe that an Erdogan presidency with Gul as prime minister will create a constant tension between the two institutions, negatively impacting the party and country's futures. Proponents of this view say that the majority of party members are in favour of

Ahmet Daud Oglu to take over in the next phase as both party leader and future prime minister.

Executive power dilemma

Despite the critical importance of the presidential elections, there is less political tension and polarisation in the Turkish arena now than during the weeks leading up to the March local elections, although they were certainly less important and less influential for the country's political future. The results of the local elections, which were held in an environment of deep political divisions as well as the opposition's feeling that they could have meant the end of Erdogan, have resolved a fair amount of tension.

If Erdogan wins in this battle (and all signs point to his victory), he will have an opportunity to remain as president for two full terms, until 2024. At present, it is difficult to predict how he will run the presidential office or achieve his goal of being more than symbolic leader while simultaneously representing the state's interests. Given that Erdogan has made this part of his presidential campaign platform, it is likely that the AKP, if it wins the 2015 parliamentary elections, would try to approve a constitutional amendment to modify the president and prime minister's roles, or even to adopt a totally new constitution by consensus or by a majority. If such an amendment is not approved, the Turkish state will remain constrained by the 2007 constitutional amendment which decreed that the president should be elected directly by the people but maintain a largely ceremonial role.

The personality of Erdogan's successor as prime minister will play a crucial role in the context of this crisis. It may keep it relatively contained or convert it to an element of tension and disturbance in the executive branch's operations. An understanding between the next prime minister and president will contribute to the distribution of powers and maintain smooth and systematic leadership of the country until the Turkish political class reviews the constitution.

Equally important is the approach that the new prime minister and his government will adopt to confirm the AKP's role in leading the country through a new stage. The country's history has known many parties that have stepped up and ruled but then drowned or disappeared after the disappearance or death of a charismatic founder. The AKP's biggest challenge in the upcoming years is to prove to citizens that the party is greater than a charismatic leader and that its presence and its leadership of Turkey is essential, going beyond the role of any single person. There is no doubt that this challenge is strongly linked to the AKP's public perception and has implications for both the state and the country in the near future, especially since Turkey has become

surrounded by seismic oriental variables that have not been seen in the Near East since the end of the First World War.

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