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Report

The Local Elections in Turkey and their Importance to Turkish Politics



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Hayrunnisa Gul, the wife of Turkish President Abdullah Gul, listens to her husband addressing the Parliament in Ankara, Turkey [AP]

In March 2014, Turkey will face the most critical local elections of all time, in the last 50 years. The local elections have occupied the national agenda as never before; neither in 1989 during the large defeat of the party of the former leader Turgut Özal, or in 1994 during the Welfare Party victory. Although there are still 6 months to these elections, the ruling Justice and Development Party and the opposition party are meticulously calculating their political chances to win this campaign.

The Local Government Structure in Turkey

Turkey is a democratic unitary country with two layers of government: central government and local governments. According to article 127 of the Constitution, which regulates the local governments, there are three types of local government units in the country, including special provincial administrations, municipalities and villages. In large cities with a population of over 750,000, a specific model of metropolitan government is established. It consists of a two-layer structure made up of metropolitan municipalities as well as several district municipalities.

Local decision makers including members of provincial and municipal councils and mayors are directly elected by citizens for five years. The administrative autonomy of local governments is ensured by the Constitution, which also give the central government a considerable authority of administrative tutelage over the local

governments. This principle of administrative tutelage has often been criticised for placing restrictions on the development of local governments. Even though Turkey has realised in the last ten years the most comprehensive local government reforms since the establishment of the Republic, the constitutional provisions related to the tutelage, which could not be amended. This fact shows that despite all positive progress in decentralization, a strong centralist culture still persists in the political and bureaucratic circles of the State.

Another important legal framework for local governments in Turkey is the European Charter of Local Self-Government, signed by Turkey in 1988 and implemented in 1993. The Charter sets the minimum international standards for local government's autonomy functioning, in relationship with the central power.

Local Government Positions in Social, Economic and Political Structure

Turkey has one of the most well-established modern local governments whose history dates back to the 19th century. Just 19 years following the first local reform in England in 1835, a country considered as the cradle of modern-style local governments, the Ottoman Empire's first municipality was established in 1854 in Istanbul. The tradition of a local government in Turkey has a history of more than a century and it is for this reason that local governments play an important role in the socio-economic and political fabric makeup of Turkey.

By 2013, almost 30% of the overall public investment is carried out by all types of local governments in Turkey, and more than 80% of total investments made by local governments are realized by municipalities (Arikboğa, 2013). They are the backbone of local governance in the country. Furthermore, almost 11.5% (a population of 294,086) of civil servants in 2010 were engaged with the local governments.

Local governments in Turkey and metropolitan municipalities in particular have become important actors to the economic growth of the country, through their large scale investments. From transportation, tourism and environmental protection, to healthcare, art and culture, and sport, many investment activities are implemented by local governments.

Since the mid-1990's local governments have become one of the major actors of the social welfare system. Comprehensive welfare activities in almost every field, starting from food, cloth, fuel, and health and education assistance to the poor, to services to elderly and disabled are fulfilled by local governments. One of the reasons, therefore,

that helped to prevent a social disaster following the 2001 economic crisis, was the welfare activities by local governments.

Nowadays local governments are also a significant laboratory of political life and a genuine springboard into national politics for successful leaders. Many current ministers and parliamentarians have served as mayors or held local government positions in the past, including the Prime Minister Erdogan, who was the former metropolitan mayor of Istanbul. This position, the mayor of Istanbul, is regarded as one of the most important political mandate in the country after that of the prime minister. Whoever holds this position, then his decisions and policies and his declarations have significance over the country's agenda.

The Local Electoral System in Turkey and the Results of the Previous Two Elections

Two different systems have been practiced so far during the local elections in Turkey. While the mayors are elected according to the "majoritarian system", local councils are elected according to the "proportional representation system". Specific tools like the 10% election threshold or the "quota candidate" method have been included in the proportional representational system in order to strengthen mayors, or in other words, the executive power. Whilst the number of council members from top voted parties in the elections (usually the same parties with the mayor) increases as a result, the number of council members of minor political parties decreases.

The ratio of votes and the number of municipalities won by four major political parties in the last two local elections held in 2004 and 2009 are shown below in the table.

Table 1: Local Elections (in 2004 and in 2009)

| Party | Votes (Million) | | Voting Rate (%) | | Number of Municipalities Won | | Number of Metropolitan Municipalities Won | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|------|-----------------|-------|------------------------------|------|-------------------------------------------|------|
| | 2004 | 2009 | 2004 | 2009 | 2004 | 2009 | 2004 | 2009 |
| Justice and Development Party | 13.4 | 15.2 | 41.67 | 38.33 | 1753 | 1404 | 12 | 10 |
| Republican People's Party | 5.9 | 9.2 | 18.23 | 23.17 | 469 | 499 | 2 | 3 |
| Nationalist Movement Party | 3.4 | 6.4 | 10.45 | 16.01 | 247 | 475 | 0 | 1 |
| Peace and Democracy Party | N/A | 2.3 | N/A | 5.73 | N/A | 96 | 0 | 1 |
| Other Parties | 10.5 | 7.8 | 29.65 | 16.76 | 732 | 382 | 2 | 1 |

Source: <http://www.ysk.gov.tr/ysk/gebelerSecimler.html>

Partial variations in voting ratios of these four political parties can be noticed between the local elections in 2004 and 2009. For instance, the voting rate of the ruling Justice and Development Party has almost decreased by 3.3 points, from 41.67% to 38.33%; the voting rate of the Republican People's Party, the main opposition group, has increased to 27.17% from 18.23%, and almost rising by 5 points. Nevertheless, the most remarkable increase can be observed in the Nationalist Movement Party. Their voting rate went up to 16.01% from 10.45%, which amounts to an increase of almost 5.5 points.

A similar case can be observed in the number of municipalities affiliated to each party. The Justice and Development Party won 1753 municipalities in 2004 and only 1404 in 2009. This decrease of 349 municipalities is partly due to the reduction in the total number of municipalities in the country, through so-called "scale reform", when small municipalities were either amalgamated or dissolved. The numbers of municipalities run by the Republican People's Party were 469 in 2004 increasing to 499 in 2009. The number of municipalities ruled by the Nationalist Movement Party increased from 247 to 475. The Justice and Development Party maintained its metropolitan municipalities, whereas the other three parties' increased by only one metropolitan municipalities each.

When analyzing the results of 2009, one can see that the Justice and Development Party had lost some votes, which can be seen as a natural development for a party that has ruled the country for seven years. Staying in the power can inevitably lead to some unpopular decisions or policies at a national level, which can also have negative repercussions on the party's local campaign. It is noteworthy to mention that there were no serious increases in the voting rates of the Republican People's Party, the main opposition group. In contrast, the Nationalist Movement Party, the third political force in Turkey, created the biggest surprise by increasing its votes by 50%.

Comparison of the Last Local and Parliamentary Elections

Fifteen months after the local elections in March 2009, the parliamentary elections were held in June 2011 in Turkey. Voting ratios and the number of deputies of major political parties in those two elections are shown in table 2. The results of the local elections in 2009 are also included in the table below, which highlights the changes in the voting ratios.

Table 2: A Comparison of Local Election (2009) and Parliamentary Election (2011)

| Party | Votes (Million) | | Voting Rate (%) | | Number and Rate of Municipalities Won (2009) | | Number and Rate of MP (2011) | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|------|-----------------|-----------|----------------------------------------------|----------|------------------------------|----------|
| | 2009 | 2011 | 2009 | 2011 | Number | Rate (%) | Number | Rate (%) |
| Justice and Development Party | 15.2 | 21.4 | 38.3 3 | 49.8 3 | 1404 | 49.2 | 327 | 59.5 |
| Republican People's Party | 9.2 | 11.1 | 23.1 7 | 25.9 8 | 499 | 17.5 | 135 | 24.5 |
| Nationalist Movement Party | 6.4 | 5.6 | 16.0 1 | 13.0 1 | 475 | 16.5 | 53 | 9.3 |
| Peace and Democracy Party | 2.3 | 2.8 | 5.73 | 6.57 | 96 | 3.4 | 35 | 6.7 |
| Other Parties | 7.8 | 2.0 | 16.7 6 | 4.61 | 382 | 13.4 | 0 | 0 |

Source: <http://www.ysk.gov.tr/ysk/GenelSecimler.html>

In comparison to the local elections in 2009, the Justice and Development increased its voting rates by 11.5 points in the 2011 parliamentary elections, increasing its vote by one-third. Conversely, there is a partial increase both in the votes received by the Republican People's Party and the Peace and Democracy Party; there is a significant decrease in the votes received by the Nationalist Movement Party. In Fact, the latter lost almost 20% of its votes.

The Impact of Gezi Park Protests

The demonstrations began on the 28 May, 2013 with the aim of protesting against the reconstruction of the historical casern of Topçu Kışlası in a public park called Gezi in the touristic Taksim Square of Istanbul. These events deeply affected the political conjuncture in Turkey, spreading into 79 out of 81 provinces.

According the Ministry of Interior, almost 2.5 million people attended the demonstrations in Gezi Park. The protests partly turned into acts of violence, specifically in big cities like Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. Serious property damages occurred in many cities and six people lost their lives. After the first few weeks, the protests lost their intensity, despite the fact that some conflicts of low intensity continued throughout the summer.

The masses of people that participated in the protests represented many different and sometimes antagonistic parts of society and political movements. The involvement of opposition parties and in particular of some marginal and violent political groups has

highly politicised the initially civic and environmentalist movement. The analysis of Gezi park protests requires a thorough examination of various factors in a separate article. In the aftermath of Gezi demonstrations, the major opposition parties seem to be hopeful to win the upcoming elections in cities like Istanbul and Ankara, which are governed by the ruling party or its political predecessors for almost 20 years. Also, with the lessons learned from Gezi, the ruling party is taking all precautions in order to minimize every electoral risk in these cities, despite many social, economic and political progresses realised under its 11-yearlong and unchallenged rule.

Conclusion

The 2014 local elections will undoubtedly play a vital role in the future of Turkey. The ruling Justice and Development Party intend to take advantage of its potential victory in the local elections for the presidential elections that will immediately follow in the second half of 2014. This is also in perspective of the parliamentary elections planned for 2015, which is another major milestone for the ruling political elite. Nonetheless, the opposition party also eyes every occasion to defeat Erdogan's party, and therefore consider the upcoming local elections as a set of potential electoral blows to his eleven-year-long rule. The Peace and Democracy Party, which positions itself as the voice of the Kurdish population in the country, also sees a vital opportunity to reach their own regional objectives in the 2014 local elections.

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