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## Report

# Local Elections in Istanbul and Erdođan's Political Future

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**Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, right, greets his supporters as he leaves from a polling station after he cast his vote in Istanbul, Turkey, Sunday, March 29, 2009. Turks were voting Sunday in local elections that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan hopes will strengthen his party's hand in pushing for constitutional reforms. Some 48 million people are voting Sunday to elect mayors and district administrators in 81 provinces. [AP]**

## Abstract

The 2014 election campaign is heating up in Turkey. In fact the 2014 polls launch a tripartite electoral process that will culminate in the country's first popular presidential elections in 2015. This report seeks to investigate this historical and arduous process, focusing on Istanbul's local elections and their implications for the political future of the incumbent Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

## Introduction

Turkey will begin its long electoral process in 2014. Local elections are scheduled to take place in March 2014. Similarly, general elections are expected to follow in August 2014. History will be made in these general elections: For the first time since the creation of the republic in 1925, the country's president will be elected directly by the people. In June 2015, legislative elections will end the sixteen-month election period. If all goes to plan Turkish citizens will have voted in three elections at national level. Moreover, the electorate could go to the polls for a fourth time during that period if a referendum on constitutional amendments was to be held in the summer of 2015. The probability of such a referendum, however, seems to decrease, if one is to be guided by the debate of the parliamentary committee in charge of constitutional law currently in session.

## The 2014 Elections & the AKP

The Justice and Development Party's (AKP) ruling position is not at stake in any of these elections. Far ahead of his rivals, incumbent Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's commanding position is not threatened, at least not in the foreseeable future. The AKP has been in power for almost eleven years. It controls most state agencies and departments, from justice to security, including public service and the police. Despite not directly controlling the army, the military has been weakened by a legal process involving open trials against hundreds of former officers, some of whom have been very high-ranking, accused of plotting to overthrow the government. This has thus far resulted in many being given severe sentences. This was part and parcel of the AKP's undertaking to dismantle the so-called 'deep state' in Turkey.

The country's leading party was founded in 2001 by Erdoğan. Thus the birth of the AKP marked a break with Turkey's tradition of secularism, which was created by Kemal Atatürk in 1925. Erdoğan has been prime minister for over ten years, and Abdullah Gül has been president of the Republic for six years. The AKP controls the State, a significant segment of the press corps, many universities, as well as a huge business network in the private sector. In June 2011, the AKP obtained fifty per cent of the vote in the country's legislative elections, showing that after ten years in power, it still benefits from its voters' confidence.

It is important to stress that the Turkish elections are not suspected of fraud. Nevertheless, the country's extremely high parliamentary threshold of ten per cent – a threshold that is unique in the world – inevitably distorts parliamentary representation in favour of the two leading parties. The AKP has greatly benefited from this threshold, which was introduced by the government that took power after the country's 1980 military coup. In 2002, during its first participation in the country's elections, the AKP obtained more than two thirds of parliamentary seats, that is, thirty-four per cent of the total vote. After that, by assimilating the electorate of the centre-right into its own, the AKP pulled off a rare political feat in the 2002-2011 period: it has consistently increased its voting numbers in legislative elections, in spite of the fact that from the start, the party had already secured key governmental functions for itself. According to opinion polls dating from the summer of 2013, the AKP continues to benefit from the loyalty of approximately fifty per cent of the Turkish electorate.<sup>(1)</sup>

Despite this idyllic image of stability, Turkey is starting to show signs of great internal political strife. Taksim Gezi Park protests are a clear example of this.<sup>(2)</sup> These tensions come primarily from members of the governing party itself, and more particularly, from

the Prime Minister. They manifest through an increasing intolerance towards any critique of the government. There is a climate of general suspicion, which stems from alleged plans by unknown forces to destabilize the country. Members of the AKP and the Prime Minister in particular, tend to harbor suspicion that hidden forces are plotting against them. In effect, the Prime Minister regards all criticism of his government as plots against his government. This explains his intolerant position towards non-violent protesters, who he aims to put on trial for terrorist activities.<sup>(3)</sup> In doing so, he is actively contributing to the consolidation of a regime that maybe seen, as an 'authoritarian democracy'. The threat of a coup d'état in Turkey is currently non-existent; however Erdoğan claims to be the target of the Kemalist elite's hegemony. By raising the spectre of a coup, he hopes to galvanise the loyalty of his supporters. Until now, adding oil to the fire of the secularist-Islamist rift has proven to be an effective political device in Turkish politics.

### **Towards a New Presidential System in Turkey**

So why this insecure behaviour on the part of Erdoğan's government if, objectively speaking, he finds himself together with his party, at the peak of their political power? This paradox can be explained, in part, by the Prime Minister's personal political project. Erdoğan wants to become the first president of the Republic to be elected by universal suffrage. As it stands, there is no candidate that shows the potential of preventing his victory in the summer of 2014. If not in the first round, Erdoğan currently has a good chance to win by the second. However, Erdoğan wants more. Because presidential powers are limited in the Turkish system, the Prime Minister wants to transform the existing system into a presidential model that suits his political ambitions. Essentially, he wants to remain the country's most powerful leader after the 2014 elections and beyond.

The AKP has submitted a proposal to the parliamentary commission presently working on the country's constitutional project for the elaboration of a new presidential model. The proposal suggests a presidential system which, as opposed to the US model for instance, would grant the president huge individual power. While doing so, it would ensure very little opposition rule, much like the presidencies of most post-soviet states. In fact, a key factor currently slowing down the constitutional commission's progress is the AKP's proposal for a 'hyper-presidential' system.

At the beginning of 2013, the possibility of a transition towards a presidential regime was still strong. Indeed, even the fervent reaction of the opposition to this proposal was muffled by Erdoğan's popularity from within a large segment of the Turkish conservative electorate<sup>(4)</sup>, as well as from within the international community. Furthermore, entering

into negotiations with the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) with the aim of peacefully resolving the Kurdish problem, contributed to a propitious political climate. The AKP's strategy seemed to have secured the support for a new presidential system from the pro-Kurdish party represented in parliament, in exchange for an agreement on the Kurdish issue. The Gezi Park protests of June 2013 and their aftermath however, meant that within only a few weeks, some of the above political forecasts had radically altered. The Prime Minister's authoritarian and arrogant attitude, combined with his unfaltering support for the Turkish police's heavy-handed treatment of what were peaceful protestors essentially requesting the preservation of a small public park, have led to serious doubts about the desirability of Erdoğan as an 'all-powerful' president. This has even come from within the ranks of the AKP's loyal supporters. Indeed, for the first time since coming to power in 2002, Erdoğan's government gave the impression that it was not in full control during the Gezi Park protests. Some advisors to the party stated, in our private conversation, that during these trying times, a few of its leaders felt as if 'the rug had been pulled out from under their feet'. The aftermath of the Gezi Park protests resulted in the loss of some of the party's moral high ground against its political opponents, for the first time in eleven years.

This political climate has been exacerbated by the successive failures of Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East, most notably in Syria and in Egypt. Turkey, which until very recently had frequently been referred to as a model for the Arab revolutions, found itself somewhat on the outside. This resulting partial isolation, welcomed by some of the Turkish Prime Minister's advisors, was inconsistent with Erdoğan's numerous speeches on the country's key international role, which he used to galvanise support from those loyal to his party. And yet, despite all of this, Turkey and Erdoğan's popularity was still at its peak until the spring of 2013.

### **The Implications of the 2014 Local Elections for Erdoğan**

An understanding of the tensions experienced by the Prime Minister and his entourage must thus be understood in the context of a drastic drop in popularity. In this context, the local elections of March 2014 take on an importance that goes beyond Turkey's national boundaries because they are already taking on the distinct form of Erdoğan's personal presidential campaign. There are two reasons for this.

The first is linked to the AKP's own internal bylaws. When the party was created in 2001, its founding members had included a rotation rule in the party's statutes, which meant that no member could be voted into the same position within the party more than three consecutive times. This rule was put in place as a measure against political leaders (be it

from the right or the left) who sought to remain in power indefinitely. It is possible that they had not anticipated that the AKP would rise to power as quickly as it did, or that it would remain the leading party without interruption for as long as it has. As it stands, because of this internal rule, most of the historical leaders of the party, and Erdoğan more so than any other, cannot put themselves forward as candidates for the legislative elections. Unless this particular statute of the AKP is changed before 2015, Erdoğan has no other choice but to run for president if he wants to pursue his political career. Until now, Erdoğan has always publicly defended the inalienable virtue of the rotation rule within the AKP and has always made a case against changing the party's statute. If Erdoğan is elected president of the Republic next summer without a prior constitutional law change, he will be forced to leave his party and relinquish its leadership to another candidate, as per the country's current constitutional ruling. It seems as though this scenario is Erdoğan's worst nightmare. This is precisely the reason for which the leaders of the AKP are hoping for a constitutional amendment. At the very least, through this, they are hoping for a mechanism that would enable their leader to retain his position within the party. Such an amendment does not, however, seem probable in Turkey's present political climate.

The second reason that the local elections of March 2014 hold such importance is that the presidential elections that will follow are closely linked to Istanbul's own local government. Erdoğan's impressive political career was launched when he was first elected mayor of the city in 1994. Previously, Erdoğan had headed the Istanbul section of the party in favour of political Islam. He was then elected mayor of Turkey's largest city with twenty-eight per cent of the vote (in a one-round uninominal election). This was thanks to the large number of candidates from all political sides that had presented themselves for the position. The AKP candidate has since won every municipal election in Istanbul, with forty-four per cent of the vote in the last one (2009) followed by only thirty-seven per cent from the centre-left candidate of the Republican People's Party (CHP). There had been some hope of assembling a heterogeneous block from the pro-Kurdish electorate, diverse coalitions from the liberal right and the left, and even some of the nationalist right electorate, against the growth of the AKP in Istanbul. But the results of the 2011 legislative elections shattered this likelihood with a 49,4 per cent win in Istanbul; in effect nearly twenty points more than the CHP, which came in second. After that victory, there was no doubt that the AKP would have a fifth consecutive electoral victory in 2013.

Despite all this, the Gezi Park protests have cast a shadow of doubt for the future. The Prime Minister's action against the people of Istanbul who were protesting against the incompetency of their city council has in a way been the straw that broke the camel's

back. Istanbul has been flooded with urban renewal projects and the building of sky scrapers and shopping malls. The Prime Minister is personally involved as project manager of a number of such projects. This was qualified at times as outlandish, even by himself.<sup>(5)</sup> Examples include a third bridge on the Bosphorus, a third very large airport, the 'Kanal Istanbul' - a canal over the sea of Marmara, and a huge Mosque on the banks of the Bosphorus, which are the expressions of a sovereign's vanity, and an attempt to remodel the city in his own image and taste. Projects for the gentrification of Taksim Square and the destruction of Gezi Park have elicited a strong reaction, which is symptomatic of the general feeling of despondency among the people. The Prime Minister sees Istanbul as his own turf, and even behaves as if he were still its mayor. Because of these reasons, the municipal elections for the new mayor of Istanbul are perceived by a growing portion of the electorate as an opportunity to oppose Erdogan. It seems that this perception of opportunity includes quite a number of the city's own AKP members. This has given credibility to the idea that perhaps implicitly, voters could very well rally around a candidate with the potential to defeat the AKP's representative in March next year. This type of scenario is not implausible in the eyes of the citizens of Istanbul alone, but the frame of mind is echoed outside of Istanbul as well. The results of the municipal elections for Istanbul's next mayor thus hold huge leverage power for the legislative and presidential elections that will follow.

An AKP defeat in Istanbul could not singularly prove fatal to Erdoğan's political ambitions, but it would certainly mean a decrease in the party's domination that has, until now, been left unchallenged. It would also provide a clear indication of Erdoğan's declining popularity in Istanbul, his political stronghold, and the country's international showcase, as well as its most important economic and cultural hub. This could break the coalition that will support the candidacy of Erdoğan in the Presidency of the Republic. We see the first signs of this fragmentation in the violent confrontation between the inner circle of Erdogan and the Gülen movement which became open in November 2013.<sup>(6)</sup>

## Conclusion

Erdogan's authoritarian management amid Gezi Park protests has shaken its popularity for the first time. Even if the Prime Minister was able to restore his popularity with the electorate a few months after the events of Gezi, this episode has created a dynamic reconciliation of all dissatisfied with its management too personal and authoritarian. At the moment there is not really a political party in opposition capable of channeling all dissatisfied throughout Turkey by Erdogan's authoritarianism. But the loss of Istanbul municipal elections by the AKP candidate could mean the beginning of the end of the path of success of Erdogan.

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## **Endnotes**

(1) In October 2013, the estimates of five pollsters gave a range of voter preference between 43% and 53% for AKP for local elections in March 2014. In 2011, general elections AKP received 49.9% of votes representing 21.4 million voters. The turnout in the 2011 elections was 83%.

(2) See, "Turkey divided more than ever by Erdoğan's Gezi Park crackdown", Ian Traylor and Constanze Letsch, Guardian, 20 June 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/20/turkey-divided-erdogan-protests-crackdown>.

(3) "Turkey: Erdoğan threatens to 'clean' Gezi Park of 'terrorists'", Guardian, 13 June 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/middle-east-live/2013/jun/13/turkey-referendum-plan-mooted-as-erdo-an-sets-protesters-deadline-live-coverage>.

(4) For an analysis of Turkish conservatism, Hakan Yilmaz, "Conservatism in Turkey", [http://esiweb.org/pdf/esi\\_turkey\\_tpq\\_vol7\\_no1\\_HakanYilmaz.pdf](http://esiweb.org/pdf/esi_turkey_tpq_vol7_no1_HakanYilmaz.pdf).

(5) "Turkish Erdogan's crazy project", <http://www.worldbulletin.net/?aType=haber&ArticleID=73035>.

(6) "Gülen Movement denies 'rift with ruling AKP'", <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/gulen-movement-denies-rift-wiht-rulling-akp.aspx?pageID=238&nID=52493&NewsCatID=338>.

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