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SWP Comment

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Stuck in the Twilight Zone?

March 2019 Municipal Elections in Turkey

T. Deniz Erkmén

After 16 years of Tayyip Erdoğan in power and with almost total control of the bureaucracy and the mainstream media, it has become hard to imagine a Turkey in which he and his party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), would not win an election. Yet, after a long nail-biter of an election night, Turkey woke up on April 1 to results indicating a major shift: Defying expectations, Turkish voters had delivered a challenge to the dominance of the governing coalition. While this came as a surprise to some, it points to growing discontent among voters that was able to find expression through institutional means. This was made possible by various parts of the opposition that ran effective alliance strategies and campaigns as well as the election-night process. This accomplishment of the opposition, however, does not necessarily mean an easy shift to a democratic path in Turkey. Much depends on how various actors in the governing coalition respond to this new picture.

On March 31, Turkish citizens voted in municipal elections for city mayors, district mayors, district councils, and neighborhood heads. The elections carried symbolic significance even though they were municipal elections: They came after the constitutional referendum of 2017 and the presidential election of 2018, which transformed Turkey's political system from a parliamentary into an executive presidential system and put Erdoğan at the head of the newly designed state with enormous *de jure* powers. Following those political events, the municipal elections were supposed to be a closing act, granting Erdoğan and his AKP – together with their coalition partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) – total control over the country for the next four

years until the scheduled elections in 2023. Yet, how the results would turn out remained an enigma. Happening amidst the worst economic crisis that the country has experienced since 2001, with the inflation rate hitting 20 percent and unemployment 12.6 percent, it was obvious that the elections constituted a test for the governing coalition. Turkish voters have a history of responding to the economy with their votes. However, as the mainstream media as well as state resources are fully controlled by the government, the ability of the government to shape the public discourse and affect voter perception to its advantage was massive, whereas the opposition's ability to campaign was severely limited. As such, it was not at all clear how voters –



fatigued from political instability and institutional reshuffling that dominated the country after the failed coup of 2016 as well as from seven elections in five years — were going to respond.

Rival Campaigning Strategies

During the campaign period, the governing coalition followed the strategy that it had used extensively before. Rather than focusing on immediate local concerns — as would be common in municipal elections — the coalition presented the elections as a referendum on the party and Erdoğan, equating their control of the state with the survival, or *beka*, of it. As expected, Erdoğan took on a very polarizing tone, accusing all parts of the opposition (and not just his usual suspects, Kurdish politicians) as being related to terrorism. The campaign period was defined by verbal attacks, slander, and threats to opposition politicians on an unprecedented level. Not only was an official investigation started against Mansur Yavaş — the main opposition party candidate of the Republican People’s Party (CHP) in Ankara — Erdoğan openly threatened to replace elected mayors again if they were “related to terrorists.” This was a direct threat to Kurdish cities that saw elected mayors from the Kurdish Democratic Regions Party (DBP) replaced with trustees in 2016. Various polls, however, showed that — unlike in 2015, when the country was shaken by multiple bombings — these tactics fell on deaf ears as voters continued to consider the economy and not security, or *beka*, as the main issue affecting their lives.

In the face of this slander, all parts of the opposition were successful in keeping an even, non-polarizing tone and running campaigns that did not react to Erdoğan. Ekrem İmamoğlu — the CHP candidate for Istanbul who was the mayor of a middle-class district in Istanbul before, but was not a nationally known figure at the start of the campaign — shone through with his non-ideological, non-polarizing style, and active, hands-on campaigning. The CHP established

a formal electoral alliance with the İYİ Party (İP), which is a secular nationalist party newly founded in 2017 by Meral Akşener, formerly from the MHP. The ultra-nationalist MHP played a key role when it allied with the AKP after the June 2015 elections, preventing the creation of an opposition government and leading to the snap elections of November 2015 amidst a resumption in violent conflict between the army and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). The MHP supported the government in the 2017 referendum for a presidential system as well, which is when Akşener and other defectors broke from it to establish the İP. While the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) was not in a formal alliance with the CHP and the İP, it was crucial for the opposition that the HDP decided not to run candidates in major metropolitan cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Adana and put its support behind opposition candidates to create a unified opposition bloc. The HDP vote in these cities varied between 6 percent and 13 percent in the national elections of 2018. Thus, a key player (if not *the* key player) for the opposition is the former HDP leader and presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtaş. From his prison cell, Demirtaş appealed to Kurdish voters in municipalities without an HDP candidate not to abstain, but rather to support the opposition bloc.

As such, the March 31 elections contained unusually complex dynamics, as there was a major economic crisis as well as multiple alliances that were not uniformly distributed across electoral districts. Whereas in smaller places local dynamics and individual candidates matter more, in metropolises the elections, in fact, became a referendum for or against the government — or rather, Erdoğan. A different dynamic was at play in Kurdish cities that were voting for or against government-appointed trustees.

The Results: A Setback for the AKP

At the time of this writing, election results have still not been finalized in Istanbul, in-

dicating resistance, and probably conflict among the governing coalition, which did not expect the outcome. Although it is not clear how things will play out in the coming days, a few trends are worth mentioning.

First, and very significant, five out of six major metropolises have been won by the CHP (Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Adana, Antalya), with four changing hands. This in itself is a major game-changer. It is the first time in 25 years that a party which has not come from the Islamic movement controls both Istanbul and Ankara. These two cities constitute 25 percent of the population in Turkey. With İzmir, Adana, Antalya, and Mersin, this figure rises to 40 percent and includes the most dynamic parts of the country. Istanbul and Ankara are crucial not only because they are the economic and cultural capitals of Turkey, but also because they are the dynamos for the coffers of the party. It is not news that the AKP was able to create an extensive patronage network using its control over these cities and their enormous municipality budgets. The investment and business deals that are distributed through Istanbul and Ankara are one of the main mechanisms through which the AKP has built and kept its hegemonic control over Turkey. The loss of these mechanisms is a major shock for the AKP governing machine.

But looking at the metropolises is not enough to comprehend the setback that the AKP and Erdoğan have experienced. These bigger cities all voted “No” during the 2017 referendum — as such, this is a continuation of their opposition to Erdoğan and the AKP. Yet, a look at the rest of the country indicates a decline in AKP support. The one party that emerges as the winner — along with the CHP — is the AKP’s formal coalition partner, the MHP. Although the AKP was able to retain its support in many of its strongholds, in one-third of the municipalities in which the MHP and the AKP candidates ran against each other (e.g., Amasya and Kastamonu), the MHP won the elections, taking cities from the AKP’s control and implying a shift of AKP voters to the MHP. Moreover, in various cities where the

AKP has won municipalities, there has been a significant drop in their share of the vote, when compared to the 2014 municipal elections. It is also important to note that it looks like the drop in AKP support corresponds not only to an increase in support for the MHP, but also the İP and even the CHP in certain locations, although a detailed analysis is required to confirm this. Lastly, although there is no uniform pattern, HDP dominance continues in Kurdish-populated provinces of the country. The HDP increased its share of the vote in multiple cities, such as Diyarbakır, Batman, and Kars, but it saw a decrease in others, such as Hakkari, and it lost the municipality in some, such as Şırnak. One needs to consider the drastic increase in the levels of repression and violence in the region after 2015 as well as the resulting demographic changes in order to assess this complicated picture.

What Does This Picture Tell Us?

Overall, these trends signify three important shifts. First, the typical Turkish electoral map — in which coastal towns remain with the secular CHP, the southeast with the Kurdish HDP, and central Anatolia with the AKP — has changed, as a number of Anatolian cities around Ankara have shifted to CHP control. Second, the truism that the Turkish electorate has solidified into two blocs is being challenged. Although the electorate has indeed been drastically polarized over years, it looks like it might move across blocs, given the right conditions and effective campaigning. Lastly, the widespread sense among the electorate and opposition — that it is not possible to weaken the AKP through electoral means — has been proven wrong. This is even more significant given the unfairness of elections.

These results present a significant challenge to Erdoğan and the AKP’s dominance in Turkey. They show that the AKP cannot rule by itself anymore. It is firmly tied to its coalition with the MHP, which will, for sure, get more weight in intra-state deals. This might constrain Erdoğan’s hand, espe-

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cially in relation to the Kurdish conflict in Turkey and beyond. A new peace process with the Kurdish forces might be unlikely, given the hawkish MHP's increasing power within the governing bloc. The results also suggest that the polarization tactics used by Erdoğan have a limit, and that the AKP has lost its appeal in motivating voters, especially given the state of the economy. When Erdoğan and the AKP entered Turkish politics, they represented a new chapter, a hope for groups who felt alienated from the secular Kemalist system. Now, after 16 years in power and having shifted increasingly toward a personalist authoritarianism, Erdoğan is losing his grip, it seems, and is facing another crucial junction.

A Bleak Outlook for an Unstable Future

This is not the first time that Turkish citizens have resisted Erdoğan's plans — in fact, with the Gezi protests of June 2013, which saw millions of people on the streets, and the elections of June 2015, which prevented an AKP majority in parliament, this can be seen as the third major occasion in which a significant number of Turkish citizens participated en masse in challenging the AKP's dominance. In the first two instances, Erdoğan and the AKP opted for further repression and autocratization in response. With the election results still not finalized two weeks after the elections, and with government-backed media as well as various actors from the governing coalition crying "electoral fraud," there is worry that the government is not willing to accept the election results. In fact, many elected officials from the HDP have still not received their mandates. The Supreme Election Council also refused office to elected HDP candidates who were expelled from office by a presidential decree during emergency rule, granting the office instead to the runner-up, which many argue is illegal. All

these incidents, however, further erode the AKP's legitimacy, which was built on the claim of electoral dominance, and might indicate a slide toward full-scale authoritarianism in Turkey.

If the recounts in Istanbul confirm the unofficial win of İmamoğlu, the most important effect of the elections might be psychological. These elections have demonstrated that — with an effective campaign and coalition-building that includes Kurdish political forces — the opposition can make inroads to power, and that the AKP might still lose. This might provide the opposition forces in Turkey with what they need most — some hope — right as they receive access to more resources, and the possibility to affect people's lives through municipal policies. They are, however, severely limited within a very centralized system where a lot of budgetary decisions are directly tied to Erdoğan. He can use this to strangle opposition municipalities, as he has threatened during the campaign, even though his hands might also be tied due to the dire state of the economy.

As such, there seems to be no easy way out of this predicament for Turkey. The ongoing economic crisis is actually linked to a political crisis, as the new political system in Turkey is stifling possibilities for effective government, choking the dynamic elements of the society. The opposition needs to take the longer view and use this opportunity effectively to organize and appeal to people — including to the AKP base — as well as to bridge differences. This might be the end of an era for Turkey, but a new day has not dawned yet. Instead, it looks like Turkey will remain in the twilight for awhile.

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