

ANALYSIS

MARCH 2014 NO: 4

TURKEY'S 2014 LOCAL ELECTIONS

HATEM ETE • YUNUS AKBABA • GALİP DALAY • SAMİ ORÇUN ERSAY •
KILIÇ BUĞRA KANAT • KADİR ÜSTÜN



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Design and Cover : M. Fuat Er

Layout : Ümare Yazar

Cover Photo : AA

Printed in Turkey, İstanbul by Turkuvaz Matbaacılık Yayıncılık A.Ş., 2014

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ABSTRACT

Turkey's election year with three upcoming races is in full force. Local elections on March 30th and the presidential elections scheduled for August 14th will determine the course of Turkish politics in the years ahead. At such a critical turning point for Turkey, this study is meant to provide a short overview of the standing of the political parties and an analysis of three major issues (Kurdish peace process, Gezi Park events, and the AK Party-Gülen rift) that will be determining factors for the outcome of the elections. While no big surprises are expected from the local elections, the perception of success or failure of the ruling party will have an impact on its calculations with respect to the presidential election and the parliamentary election in 2015.

In a highly polarized election atmosphere, parties tend to focus on particular issues and appear caught up in short-term political fights. The resolution of the Kurdish issue, drafting of a truly civilian constitution, and further democratization of the political system as a whole remain the most significant institutional and structural issues for Turkey. Regardless of what happens in the upcoming elections cycle, parties competing to run the country will have to come up with a comprehensive agenda and a viable strategy to resolve these issues.

While no big surprises are expected from the local elections, the perception of success or failure of the ruling party will have an impact on its calculations with respect to the presidential election and the parliamentary election in 2015.

INTRODUCTION

Turkey's election year with three upcoming races is in full force. Local elections on March 30th and the presidential elections scheduled for August 14th will determine the course of Turkish politics in the years ahead. At such a critical turning point for Turkey, this study is meant to provide a short overview of the standing of the political parties and an analysis of three major issues (Kurdish peace process, Gezi Park events, and the AK Party-Gülen rift) that will be determining factors for the outcome of the elections. While no big surprises are expected from the local elections, the perception of success or failure of the ruling party will have an impact on its calculations with respect to the presidential election and the parliamentary election in 2015.

As the AK Party completed its first decade in power in 2013, it was challenged domestically in unprecedented ways. The most significant domestic challenge to the AK Party had been the 2007 presidential election crisis whereby the prevalent tutelage system refused to allow an AK Party candidate to be elected president. Subsequently, the closure case against the AK Party in 2008 targeted the party's very existence. The AK Party emerged out of that crisis stronger than

ever as many in Turkey supported the elected civilians against the military and civilian bureaucratic establishment.

Fast forward to 2013, the Gezi Park protests in May-June presented a challenge whereby certain segments of the society expressed their discontent in the streets. They chose the street because they saw no alternative party through which they could channel their opposition. At the same time, the actions of radical groups, who hijacked the protests, led to serious clashes between the police and the protesters. The government had difficulty controlling the protests and focused on marginal groups manipulating the crowds. Radical elements trying to bring down the government through undemocratic means blemished legitimate and genuine environmental demands, which the government also acknowledged, though belatedly. In the end, it was clear that a new generation of youth felt disillusioned and disconnected from the legitimate political process. Responding to this group's politicization in the streets remains a challenge for all political parties. The opposition parties have not found a way to harness the energy created by the protests and turn it into votes for themselves. The legacy of the protests will nevertheless have an impact on the upcoming election cycle.

In December 2013, a different kind of challenge was presented to the ruling AK Party. This time, it was confronted by a well-organized network of prosecutors, police officers and judges affiliated with the Gülen movement, who attempted to force the government into resignation through corruption allegations. The Gülen movement had been in an undeclared political struggle against the government since February 2012 (if not before) when a prosecutor attempted to question (probably intending to arrest him) the national intelligence chief, Hakan Fidan, who was undertaking secret negotiations with the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, on behalf of the state. When the Gülen movement

failed to push back against the government plans to shut down the university exam prep schools in the fall of 2013, a graft probe involving government ministers was launched in December. The ensuing political struggle has exacerbated the already polarized political climate in the country. The fallout from the rift between the AK Party and the Gülen movement is significant and will likely have an impact on the election results, though not significantly.

As we head to the municipal elections on March 30th, the impact of the Gezi Park events and the AK Party-Gülen split will be of critical importance. However, although more in the background in this election season, the resolution of the Kurdish question, meaning the full disarmament of the PKK in the short-term in exchange of extending more cultural and political rights to the Kurds, remains the single most important challenge for the country. This issue concerns not only the Kurdish political movement, but also how the relationship between the state and its citizens will be defined in Turkey. As the AK Party made its local election platform about national issues, many will vote according to whether they support the Kurdish resolution process. Both the Gezi events and the AK Party-Gülen fight will have electoral implications but their impact will likely be more limited in the long run when compared to the resolution of the Kurdish issue.

Whether the dominant ruling party can emerge out of this election cycle in an ever stronger position as happened in the 2007 crisis remains an open question. If it can, the opposition parties will have to take a hard look at their positions. The opposition parties, with the exception of the BDP, made the corruption allegations the centerpiece of their election campaign. If this strategy yields no significant results, the opposition parties will be hard pressed to come up with broader and more comprehensive election platforms instead of focusing entirely on the alleged failures of the ruling party.

In this report, we analyze the four political parties represented in the parliament that are entering the municipal elections. You will find a review of the parties' election platforms, campaign strategies, and candidate profiles. The report also includes separate discussions of three major issues that will likely have the most impact not only on the local elections but also the presidential vote in August 2014 and parliamentary elections in 2015.

AK PARTY TOWARDS LOCAL ELECTIONS

“The December 17 operation transformed the local elections into a vote of confidence for the AK Party government. March 30 is longer about municipalities and town councils but Mr. Erdoğan's future.”¹ This sentiment has become a widely shared among astute and seasoned observers of Turkish politics. The Gezi Park protests of the last summer, the graft probe of late December, and ensuing power struggle between the governing AK Party and the Gülen Movement, a religious organization with a wide presence within the state apparatus, gave the upcoming local elections an atmosphere of general elections.

This election will be the first round of three elections and can be seen as a rehearsal for the presidential election in August 2014 and general election in 2015. As a result, the municipal elections on March 30th have further polarized the political climate and rendered the elections atmosphere tense. The main opposition party, the Republican People Party (CHP), with the help from the Gülen Movement, has been trying to dent the AK Party's electoral strength and Prime Minister Erdoğan's aura of invincibility by utilizing the leaked illegal wiretappings, irrespective

1. Hatem Ete, “Political significance of local elections”, *Daily Sabah*, March 10, 2014, <http://www.dailysabah.com/columns/hatem-ete/2014/03/10/the-political-significance-of-local-elections>

of whether they are genuine or doctored, and alleged corruption cases of high ranking party officials in its election campaign.

The result of the local elections will be regarded by many as a vote of confidence for the AK Party in general and Prime Minister Erdoğan in particular. Government circles denotes 40 percent of the vote in the election as the threshold of success, a figure lower than the 50 percent of the vote that the AK Party received in the last general election held in 2011, but still higher than the result of the last local elections in 2009, in which the AK Party received 38.8 percent of the vote. From this perspective, any figure above the 40 percent will embolden the AK Party and Prime Minister Erdoğan and motivate him to run in the upcoming presidential election set for August.

Any election result that falls below 40 percent of the vote is likely to lead to a reappraisal of Erdoğan's decision to run. Instead, the AK Party might discard its by-law, which denotes that a party member cannot serve in the parliament for more than three consecutive terms (due to this rule over 70 AK Party MPs will not be able to seek reelection to the Parliament), and pave the way for Erdoğan to run for the Prime Minister office for another term. Thus, the upcoming local elections might serve as a watershed moment both for the AK Party and Prime Minister Erdoğan.

As a sign of the importance of this election, for the first time in Turkey's history, a political party, the AK Party, published a detailed local election charter. To better comprehend the significance of this election for the AK Party, it is necessary to examine the profiles of the party's candidates and the main themes that Erdoğan stresses in election rallies.

Profile of Candidates

In this election, the AK Party seems to judge its level of success and failure not by the number of municipalities that it wins but rather by the level of overall support, i.e. the percentage of votes it

receives. To put it differently, in places that the AK Party is set to win, the party's main goal is to achieve this result by the highest margin possible. In places that the party is behind its rivals, it aims to close the gap between itself and winning party as much as possible. Due to the fact that the AK Party, PM Erdoğan and opposition parties treat this election as a vote of confidence for the government and Erdoğan, every vote counts for the AK Party.

To this end, AK Party nominated high-profile candidates even in localities where the chance of success is slim in order to attain the highest level of votes. Three former ministers and 11 MPs were nominated for various municipalities. The common denominator of these names is that they performed successfully in their cabinet posts and hence received wide public sympathy for their performance. Former Transportation Minister Binali Yıldırım is joining the race from İzmir, Turkey's third largest city, currently run by the CHP's Aziz Kocaoğlu. Former Justice Minister Sadullah Ergin and former Family and Social Policy Minister Fatma Şahin are running respectively for Hatay and Gaziantep municipalities. A number of high-ranking party officials, who rank high in public opinion polls, were nominated for critical towns. For instance, AK Party's deputy chairman Menderes Türel was nominated for Antalya, a city currently run by the CHP's Mustafa Akaydın. This is expected to be a close race between the AK Party and the CHP. The AK Party avoided any "risky" decisions during the candidate selection process. When it comes to incumbents, the AK Party retained the names that performed well in office, while discarding those who underperformed.

Themes in Election Rallies

Given that this election is taking place in the wake of a fierce power struggle between the AK Party and the Gülen Movement, the party's election discourse, especially that of the Prime Min-

ister Erdoğan, is focused on the activities of the movement within the state apparatus. For a long time, the Gülen Movement has been accused of forming an autonomous structure, which prioritizes its political interests and agenda over that of the public within the state. From Kurds to liberals and secularists to Islamists, different groups have complained about the presence of a Gülenist structure, especially within the police and the judiciary, as well as their tendency to use the state's power to attain the group's goals. Yet, the government remained largely silent to these complaints and criticisms until recently.

When the Gülen Movement felt strong and secure enough in the system to actively pursue an agenda contrary to that of the elected government by utilizing its bureaucratic might, the seeds for confrontation between the sides were sown. The feud between the two sides has been going on for the last couple years. Yet with the Gülenist orchestrated, politically motivated December 17th graft probe and ensuing vehement power struggle, the discord between the sides has become glaringly apparent to public. As a result of this power struggle, the public has come to learn not only unpalatable aspects of the government's conduct but also irregular and illegal activities of the Gülenists within the state. For instance, the public recently learned that bureaucrats affiliated with the Gülen Movement wiretapped thousands of peoples' phones for the past three years. These irregularities committed by Gülenists within the state apparatus have become a dominant part of Erdoğan's election discourse. Erdoğan offers detailed accounts of such activities and vows to clean them from the state in election rallies.

Erdoğan speaks of the improvement, progress, and stability that Turkey has experienced under the AK Party government. He asks for the renewal of electoral support in order to continue on this path of progress and socio-economic improvement. In addition to mega proj-

ects, Erdoğan stresses the importance of Turkey's Kurdish peace process. He argues that sustained public support in local elections is imperative for the peace process to move forward.

Conclusion

Turkey's March 30th local elections can no longer be regarded as local elections. Neither local issues nor services are being debated and the overall mood is that of a critical general election. Major political issues and the political futures of Erdoğan and AK Party are being contested. In this respect, the election represents an important turning point for Turkish politics, Erdoğan's political career and the future of his party. Cognizant of this fact, Erdoğan has launched a forceful election campaign similar to the ones we are used to seeing before general elections. If this strategy produces a convincing general majority, meaning a comfortable lead over the other parties well above the 39 percent threshold, the party will likely feel more comfortable with its choice of a presidential candidate. This may also ensure a positive prospect for the general election in 2015.

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CHP TOWARDS LOCAL ELECTIONS

The CHP (Republican People's Party) is the oldest political party in Turkey. It would be wrong, however, to attribute its significance and distinc-

tive role in Turkish political life to its 90 year-old history. The CHP has also assumed a crucial mission in building a society envisaged by the founding cadre of the Republic. This mission includes a top-down transformation of political and social life through radical interference in people's daily lives. Discontent caused by this interference was clearly seen after the multi-party system was adopted in the 1950s. In fact, the CHP has never come to power alone since the very first multi-party elections, which was held following the end of an authoritarian single-party regime, with the exception of a one-month minority government formed in 1977.

Today, it is clear that tutelary actors in the country have been trying to politically weaken or eliminate the AK Party since it came to power.

Elections and the CHP

It is possible to argue that the failure of the party in every election since 1950 brought about a quest for change in the CHP. These quests yielded positive results in the 1973 and 1977 elections under the chairmanship of Bülent Ecevit.² In both elections, the CHP emerged as the majority party and had a chance to form a coalition government. The CHP was closed down by the military coup on September 12, 1980 and reestablished in 1992. Yet, the CHP did not attain significant success in elections after it was reestablished. This is true for both local and general elections. The CHP went through diffi-

2. This period coincides with the time when the CHP adopted "Left of the Center" discourse. For more information on the left of the center see: Mustafa Altunoğlu CHP'de Lider, Tavan ve Taban Analizi Rapor, Seta 2014.

cult times during the 1990s. Having passed the election threshold by the narrowest of margins with 10.7 percent in the 1995 general election,³ the CHP assumed a significant role in the early elections held during the February 28th process. The party remained below the threshold by receiving 8.7 percent of the vote in the 1999 general election as a result of its position vis-à-vis the soft-coup, which led to a historic electoral defeat.

When the AK Party (Justice and Development Party) came to power in 2002, the CHP became the second largest party represented in the parliament. The CHP received 19.37 percent of the vote in the 2002 election. Other leading actors in Turkish politics failed to enter parliament. Deniz Baykal served as the chairman of the CHP from 2002 to 2010, when he was forced to resign over a video scandal. During this period, Baykal adopted a strategy based on "secularism" and "nationalism." These two principles lay at the root of the CHP's fierce opposition to the AK Party. Following a fractured political scene in the 1990s, the country's mood favored change and the AK Party had the mandate to build a new Turkey due to the political power and social support it received.

For the CHP, the AK Party was a threat, which corroded secularism, provoked divisions in the country and harmed the regime. However, CHP elites are not the only ones with such a perception. Today, it is clear that tutelary actors in the country, who also support a similar point of view, have been trying to politically weaken or eliminate the AK Party since it came to power. It is noteworthy that the CHP has supported anti-democratic initiatives to design politics from the outside. Its support for non-political actors' attempts to prevent the election of an AK Party candidate in the 2007 presidential election clear-

3. Ete, Eşkinat, Siyaset Arayışından Arayış Siyasetine SETA Analiz, 2013

ly indicates a significant relationship between the CHP and tutelary actors.

Another noteworthy issue during the chairmanship of Baykal was the EU-Turkey relationship. The CHP mostly expressed a strong opposition, with a degree of skepticism, to Turkey's efforts to improve its relations with the EU and become an EU member. Rather than proposing an alternative political program based on secularism and nationalism, the CHP fiercely opposed the AK Party's efforts to build a new Turkey and people began to question the chairmanship of Deniz Baykal when the party failed to meet expectations in the 2004 and 2009⁴ local elections and 2007⁵ general election. Consequently, a weakened Baykal was forced to resign in 2010 and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was elected as the chairman of the party.

Kılıçdaroğlu's CHP

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu adopted a strategy to renew the CHP and render the party as a serious alternative to the ruling party. The ultimate goal of this strategy is obviously to bring the party to power. However, the CHP needs to renew not only its discourse but also its cadres in order to attain this goal. One significant difference has been that Kılıçdaroğlu has given up Baykal's ultra-secularist discourse. Instead, Kılıçdaroğlu has adopted a rhetoric that focuses on people's daily problems and the significance of meeting the requirements of being a "social state" in particular. Kılıçdaroğlu's rhetoric does not appear to have received sufficient support from society but it is a different than that of Baykal. Furthermore, Kılıçdaroğlu proved to be more constructive towards the Kurdish issue and new constitution-drafting process, while Baykal refused to

come to any agreement with the AK Party on these issues. When it comes to foreign policy, however, both Baykal and Kılıçdaroğlu do not welcome the AK Party's policies. The CHP has charged the AK Party with drifting away from Atatürk's principle of "peace at home, peace abroad" and adopting a foreign policy that conflicts with Turkey's interests.

The CHP and the Kurdish Settlement Process

Kılıçdaroğlu supports a resolution of the Kurdish issue, but opposes the resolution strategy adopted by the AK Party.⁶ He argues that the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM) should seek a resolution and opposes the resolution of the issue by means of a social consensus. Therefore, he does not, in theory, oppose the objective but rather the method and the actor, i.e. the AK Party, who may accomplish it. The CHP has been challenged by Kurdish political actors for not coming up with a serious proposal on how to resolve the Kurdish issue. This remains a handicap for the party in elections, especially in localities with a significant Kurdish population.

The CHP and the Coup Cases

Kılıçdaroğlu reiterates that he is against the interference of the army in politics in Turkey;⁷ however, he does not consider the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases heard by the courts in Silivri as a move to prevent such interference. He argues that courts in Silivri launched an unlawful process that politicizes the judiciary and renders the military a toy in the hands of the party in power. The ruling party acknowledges the problems with

4. The CHP received 21 % of the vote in the 2004 local election and 25 % of the vote in 2009. See <http://www.yerelsecim.com/YerelSecimSonuclari.asp?SY=2004>

5. The CHP received 20.88 % of the vote in the 2007 general election.

6. Here is a significant document indicating that the CHP supports the resolution process, while opposing the strategy employed in this process. See Kılıçdaroğlu's statements during a meeting at Swiss Hotel: <http://siyaset.milliyet.com.tr/chp-cozum-sureci-onerilerini-siyaset/detay/1706510/default.htm>

7. <http://haber.gazetevatan.com/kilicdaroglu-asker-gorevini-yapar-kislasinda-oturur/362187/9/siyaset>

regard to the way the cases were handled because of the judicial deficiencies, but maintains that the coup plotters' trials were justified and the military tutelage system needs to be eradicated. The CHP, however, has a difficult time distancing itself from the coup plotters while advocating for the civil rights of the suspects. The CHP's history as a party of the establishment requires it to do more in terms of convincing the general public that it categorically opposes the military and civilian bureaucracy's tutelage over the system.

The CHP and the New Constitution Drafting Process

Kılıçdaroğlu has adopted more moderate opposition language towards the new constitution drafting process compared to that of Baykal. Baykal fiercely opposed drafting a new constitution.⁸ He argued that there is no need to change the constitution completely. Instead, he suggested making partial amendments to democratize the country. Under the chairmanship of Kılıçdaroğlu, on the other hand, the CHP supported the new constitution-drafting process by sending three members to the "Constitutional Consensus Commission." Even though disagreements over significant issues both within the CHP and among other parties seem to have blocked the new constitution-drafting process, Kılıçdaroğlu's and the CHP's efforts to contribute to the process have been noteworthy.

The New CHP

Given the discourse of the CHP under the chairmanship of Kılıçdaroğlu on several issues from the Kurdish issue to the new constitution-drafting process, and from Turkish foreign policy to civil-military relations and the judiciary, it is possible to talk about at least a partial break with the chairmanship of Baykal. However, this has not

been a radical rupture to give birth to a whole new party.

We have mentioned that Kılıçdaroğlu's quest for renewing the party firstly includes renewing its discourse. The second step, which is quite significant, is to renew the cadres of the party and to reach out to the masses. The discourse of the "new CHP" includes positive discrimination in favor of youth and women. As a result, the renewal of the cadres of the party firstly focuses on giving priority to the youth and women. This renewal has also included reaching out to social democrats and socialist leftists, as well as welcoming actors with center-right backgrounds. This last move of the party has been criticized on grounds that the party is drifting towards the right. Yet, there seems no other option for Kılıçdaroğlu to consolidate his power within the party and bring the new CHP to power. Whether the party can digest its newly adopted discourse and welcome fresh blood in its cadres may determine the party's future and its viability as a serious alternative.

Local Elections: Agenda, Campaign and Candidates

The CHP will take part in the local elections by adopting a strategy that seeks to reach out to different segments of society as described above. It seems that the new CHP has partially discarded its old discourse. It has a wide diversity of candidates not only from the center-left but also from the center and far-right. The nominations of a former MHP member (Mansur Yavaş) for Ankara and a former mayor from the AK Party (in Hatay) can be seen as necessary moves for the CHP to come to power in the long run. It is also noteworthy that candidates who the İstanbul mayoral candidate Sarıgül suggested or Kılıçdaroğlu wanted were nominated instead of those mayors who are close to Baykal. The goal behind this move is to consolidate Kılıçdaroğlu's influence within the party.

8. For Baykal's opposition to the drafting of a new constitution see: <http://www.haberaktuel.com/deniz-baykal-anayasa-degisikligi-paketini-degerlendiriyor-haberi-91510.html>

The CHP, like the MHP, focused only on the judicial/criminal dimensions of the December 17th operation and adopted an anti-AK Party discourse prior to the upcoming elections. Kılıçdaroğlu promises to reduce the price of gasoline and dwells on economic issues, such as national agriculture, export and import statistics, during election meetings. These themes indicate that he is trying to create an atmosphere of a general election by means of utilizing conjectural developments on the campaign road. Similarly, the CHP's election campaign strategy is also based on its quest to channel the energy of the Gezi protests and the votes from the Gülen movement. Consequently, Kılıçdaroğlu is attempting to use his trump cards to both maintain his influence within the party and bring the CHP to power in 2015 by achieving a significant showing in the local elections.

MHP TOWARDS LOCAL ELECTIONS

For over 40 years, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) has participated in almost every election, except for extraordinary times in Turkish political history including the pre-1980 period. The MHP made its most critical electoral showing shortly after Devlet Bahçeli assumed leadership of the party, when it came in second after the Democratic Left Party (DSP) by receiving 17.97 percent of the votes in the 1999 general election. The MHP became the junior partner in the three-party, DSP-MHP-ANAP (The Motherland Party), coalition.

The Last Decade of Elections and the MHP

The MHP's performance in elections held in the last decade may give some clues about its prospective performance in the local elections scheduled for March 30, 2014. The party was affected

by political crises during the coalition government period of 1999-2002 and the economic crisis in 2001. It remained under the 10 percent election threshold and outside the parliament after its votes dropped from about 18 percent in 1999 to 8.35 percent in the 2002 elections.

In the 2004 local elections, the MHP failed to save itself from the psychological impact of the general election on November 3, 2002. The reason was that the party had managed to win only 247 municipalities, four of which were Niğde, Gümüşhane, Kastamonu and Iğdır,⁹ out of 3101 province and township municipalities, even though its general votes rose to 10.13 percent. In the 2002 general election, the MHP received 14.27 percent of the vote and managed to gain seats in the parliament.

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The 2007 general election was the last election¹⁰ in which the MHP was able to stand out in the Central Anatolia region to some degree. The party succeeded in having representatives in this region, although the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) swept the votes in this particular electoral zone. The rising Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terror, which escalated between 2004 and 2007 in particular, and the entrenched votes of the nationalist masses against the PKK terror and the Kurdish question, especially in the provinces of Adana, Mer-

9. Hamit Emrah Beriş MHP Analysis

10. Hamit Emrah Beriş MHP Analysis

sin, Antalya, Muğla, Aydın and Çanakkale, were factors behind the MHP's relative success in the 2007 general election. The MHP settled at the 25 percent voting band in these cities after winning about 10 percent above its 14 percent national average in the 2011 general election. The MHP managed to hold onto its constituents by gaining a 13 percent nationwide average during the 2011 general election.¹¹ Keeping the MHP's general election performance in mind, it is important to examine the 2009 local elections in order to make a comparison.

The MHP's position will be critical in terms of the outcome of the local elections, as its potential alliance with the CHP could impact the results.

As far as the MHP's voting potential (without the impact of conjectural changes such as the PKK terror) is considered, the party made its most critical move in the 2009 local elections and won a total of 10 provincial municipalities, including Adana Metropolitan Area Municipality, with 16.1 percent of the vote, the highest after the 1999 general election. It would be a mistake to expect a dramatic increase in MHP votes on March 30, 2014. The MHP will most likely stay within the 15 percent voting band.

The MHP's Political Agenda and Election Strategy

Local elections were simply viewed as an election day a few years back. However, the March 30th local elections have become much more consequential. They are regarded as the first round of the presidential election and a vote of confidence

for the government due to the ongoing political crisis, coup trials, developments in Turkish foreign policy, failed constitution writing process, Gezi Park protests, and the December operations against the AK Party government.

The MHP's position will be critical in terms of the outcome of the local elections, as its potential alliance with the CHP could impact the results. Although this will be a local election and candidates are supposed to be focused on the services they offer to society, national agenda has dominated the headlines and MHP's attitude towards these developments is crucially important. The MHP's approach to the trials of the attempted coups, foreign policy developments and the Kurdish settlement process is starkly different from the ruling AK Party. The MHP sees all these through a negative perspective. The party, however, displayed relatively more constructive behavior during the Gezi Park protests, the new constitution writing process and the December 17th operations. More precisely, it has preferred not to stake out a political stance and remained reserved in the wake of the December 17th operations and especially during the Gezi protests.

Coup Cases and the MHP

For the last three years, the MHP stressed civilian politics in the discussions involving coups and tutelages. However, the party has gone through some internal conflicts on this particular issue. In other words, the MHP stood against the military coup d'états in the past (e.g., the September 12, 1980 coup) but it appears as if it supported the failed coups. The MHP's opposition to military-bureaucratic pressures and tutelage over civilian politics seems weaker when it comes to the more recent coup cases such as Ergenekon. As such, immediately after the MHP submitted a parliamentary resolution in 2012 for an investigation into the coups, Chairman Bahçeli issued a statement, reading "Those who shut down the Parliament on September 12 (1980), committed an offense

11. Ete, Taşdelen, Ersay, Report

by attempting a tune up on February 28 (1997, post-modern coup) and who tried to shape and take control of the steering-wheel of politics on April 27 (2007, military e-memorandum) must be punished deservedly.”¹² In a written statement released following the verdict in the case against a coup attempt, publicly known as the Balyoz (Sledgehammer) case, Bahçeli expressed discontent about the court's decision and the punishments given to the defendants.¹³ Therefore, the MHP appears to exhibit an ambivalent attitude in terms of the attempted-coup cases in particular and the civil-military relations in general.

Turkey's Pro-active Foreign Policy and the MHP

Cards have been reshuffled in the Middle East after the Arab Spring, as the entire region - Egypt and Syria in particular - has gone through a dynamic process of revolution and regime change. Turkey has acted in line with the spirit of time and taken her place as an involved party in the ongoing developments. The MHP prefers to use foreign policy issues in internal politics. While reading regional developments as a whole, but particularly in Syria and Egypt, the MHP acts selectively based on ethnic structures of the relevant countries. Regardless of Turkey's priorities in terms of relations with Syria and Northern Iraq, the MHP adopts a reductionist approach built on preventing harm to Turks and Turkmen's identities.¹⁴ In its ethnic-based references,

12. <http://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/734055-demokrasinin-iffetini-savunmaliyiz->

13. For Bahçeli's written statement, see. <http://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/778540-bahceliden-balyoz-yorumu>

14. In the chaotic process in Syria that the MHP was involved in, the party gave importance to the opening of the Turkmen Assembly and appreciated the government's support in this particular event although the MHP usually opposes the government's foreign policy; this is important to understand the party's emphasis on the ethnic identity in the region. See “MHP'li Şandır'dan Erdoğan'a Suriye teşekkürü”, *Zaman*, March 30, 2013. http://www.zaman.com.tr/politika_mhpli-sandirdan-erdogana-suriye-tesekkuru_2071882.html

the MHP suggests that the government approach the issue through a security perspective because of the fear of division, a potential risk created by the emergence of Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria. The MHP's basic approach as far as Egypt is concerned is that the Turkish government interfered in the internal affairs of Egypt.¹⁵

The MHP as “Last Stronghold” in the Kurdish Resolution Process

The resolution process to the Kurdish question has gained momentum in 2013. The MHP remained on the safe side during the initial stages of the process, as it created hopes for peace countrywide. In late February, however, when the talks held on İmralı Island between the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) and the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan were leaked to the press, Bahçeli and his MHP adopted stern language against the solution of the Kurdish problem, arguing that “the state is in destitution” and that “the country has begun to be divided.”

The MHP's language tried to push the “Turkishness” notion to the foreground against the resolution process¹⁶ by seeking support from the Turkish Hearths (Türk Ocakları), an organization with which the party had not been in dialogue with for over 10 years. In order to strengthen its position through its opposition to the resolution process, the MHP began to hold open-air meetings under the name “Protect and Keep Alive Your National Values.”¹⁷ However, in the third leg of the MHP meetings, a few days after a gathering themed “The Motherland” took place in Adana, the Gezi Park protests broke out in Istanbul. As all other political actors, the

15. “Bahçeli'den hükümete ‘Mısır’ tavsiyesi”, July 4 2013 <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/23655874.asp>

16. “Bahçeli'den 10 yıl sonra Türk Ocakları'na Ziyaret”, *Milliyet*, March 8 2013. <http://siyaset.milliyet.com.tr/bahceli-den-10-yil-sonra-turkocaklari-nazyaret/siyaset/siyasetdetay/08.03.2013/1677700/default.htm>

17. <http://hasulkuhaber.com/haberdetay/MHP-DEN-MILLI-DEGERLERI-KORU-VE-YASAT-MITINGLERI/450>

MHP concentrated on these protests. The MHP has maintained a tough stance against the Kurdish resolution process after the protests faded out in July 2013.

Gezi Park and the MHP

The Gezi Park protests in May-June 2013 focused on the AK Party and the main opposition party, the CHP, supported the protests. The BDP remained hesitant and the MHP did not romanticize or support the protests. Supporting the protests virtually had little or no cost for the MHP compared to the other political parties but the MHP's attitude differed from other parties. It is possible to look at the MHP's behavior in three phases. In the first week of the demonstration, the MHP stayed away from the protests. In this attitude, we can identify the "bitter memories in the streets" as a factor in the MHP's detached attitude. "Obscurity" and the "depth" of the protests also played a critical role.¹⁸ As the streets began to boil in the second week and the death toll increased, Bahçeli prioritized the Gezi Park protests and called for the use of common sense.¹⁹ With the deceleration of the protests, Bahçeli and the MHP went back to their routines and opposed Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the AK Party through the Gezi Park demonstrations and the Kurdish resolution process.

Internal Opposition within the MHP

The MHP is going into the local elections with a key item on the party agenda: the intraparty opposition. On November 4, 2012, Bahçeli was re-elected to the party leadership, but at the 10th party convention, a 40-percent opposition formed through other candidates against Bahçeli, namely Koray Aydın and Musavat

Dervişoğlu. The opposition is the strongest in the history of the MHP and the reason is the longing for a renewal and dynamism within the MHP grassroots. Despite Bahçeli's 16 years as chairman, the MHP remained in power only for a short time. According to the ultra-idealist-nationalist cadres within the party, the discontent mainly stems from the weak and passive style of opposition. Bahçeli's drifting the party toward the leftist-nationalist line of politics and departing from the traditional ultra-idealist-nationalist (*ülkücü*) philosophy of the MHP. Following the national convention in 2012, the MHP's upper administration closed down the province branches that supported the intra-party opposition and tried to suppress dissidents in 2013.²⁰ In order for the MHP to ensure its unity in the upcoming local and general elections, the party leadership will need to initiate a dialogue with the opponents.

The MHP's Local Election Agenda, Campaign and Candidates

The main axis of the MHP's local election agenda is the legal dimension of the December 17th operations against the government. Bahçeli is trying to put pressure on the AK Party through the corruption allegations and prefers to ignore the political dimension of the plot by the Gülen Movement, to the point that Bahçeli, during election campaign speeches, accuses Erdoğan and the AK Party of the alleged corruption. Yet, he approaches the issue with a measure of prudence and speaks of possibilities when it comes to the parallel organization within the state (formed by the Gülen Movement).²¹

18. "Kriz Üretiyorlar", *Hürriyet*, June 4 2013, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/23431913.asp>

19. "Bahçeli'den Sağduyu Çağrısı", *Anadolu News Agency*, June 7 2013. <http://www.aa.com.tr/tr/tag/190862--kabus-senaryosununkaranlik-faillerine-izin-vermemeli>

20. "MHP 5 ilde 'Aydın' operasyonu yaptı", *Milliyet*, February 9, 2013, <http://siyaset.milliyet.com.tr/mhp-5-ilde-aydin-operasyonuyapti/siyaset/siyasetdetay/09.02.2013/1666515/default.htm>

21. For the details of Bahçeli's language, see his speech at the Local Administrations Election Campaign Promotion Meeting on February 8, 2014, "MHP Seçim Kampanyası Tanıtım Toplantısı" http://88.255.31.62/htmldocs/genel_baskan/konusma/3224/index.html

We should also add that the MHP's local election strategy is founded on treating March 30th as a turning point. Bahçeli's following remarks point to this strategy: "March 30th must be a preparation of the pre-destined days in which AKP will lose at the ballot-box for the sake of our state, for the future of our nation and for the sake of our land."²² Bahçeli's language may be linked to the fact that the MHP has no hope of winning in the local elections. The three largest provinces in Turkey (Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir) have approximately 15 million voters, one third of the total voters; the MHP has no strong candidates in these cities. The party has launched a campaign against the CHP to win at least Izmir Metropolitan Area Municipality for its candidate Murat Taşer. The MHP stresses that Izmir is not the stronghold of the CHP²³ and that they will wipe out the CHP at the ballot box.²⁴ In this regard, our prediction about the MHP's local election results may be as follows:

The best the MHP can get out of the March 30th local elections will be to keep the provincial municipalities that are already in its hand and win a few additional municipalities in the countryside. Therefore, it will not be realistic to expect a dramatic drop, or increase, in the MHP's votes in March.

BDP TOWARDS LOCAL ELECTIONS

The Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) is the legal representative of the Kurdish political movement and has a unique place in Turkey's political life as the latest representative of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) in parliament. The BDP is

22. <http://www.bugun.com.tr/son-dakika/bahceli-30-marttaki-secimler--haberi/889633>

23. <http://www.bugun.com.tr/son-dakika/mhp-izmir-buyuksehir-adayi-taser--haberi/942918>

24. <http://www.bugun.com.tr/son-dakika/mhpli-taser-chpyi-sandikta--haberi/947287>

preparing for the local elections on March 30th with a confidence stemming from the peace process, aimed at ending the 30 years of conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state through the disarmament of the PKK. The Turkish government launched peace talks with Abdullah Öcalan (the PKK leader serving a life sentence in the island of İmralı) through intelligence officers at the end of 2012 that led to a ceasefire in 2013. During the process, serious reforms have been implemented, particularly the lifting of the bans on Kurdish language and identity. Prime Minister Erdoğan and the AK Party, as the most powerful rival of the BDP in Kurdish majority regions, demonstrated political determination both in initiating the process and pressing for the necessary democratic reforms. Accordingly, the BDP's success in the March 30th local elections will be judged according to their gains vis-à-vis the AK Party.

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Besides the fact that the BDP and the PKK share a common base and an ideological and political affinity, what made the pro-Kurdish BDP an important political actor is their considerable success in the Kurdish majority region in the East and among Kurds settled in the western provinces. In the last general election, they sent 35 MPs to the parliament. In the 2009 local elections, the BDP won 100 district and town municipalities in addition to eight provinces. The Kurdish

political movement aims to double those numbers in the upcoming local elections.

The March 30th local elections differ from previous local elections due to the political crisis in Turkey. Major events in 2013, such as the peace process, Gezi protests, and December 17th corruption probe, increased the political tension and turned the atmosphere of the local elections into a general election.

The BDP enjoys the comfortable environment created by the peace process more than the AK Party in Kurdish majority provinces. The party considers the local election results to be a ‘make or break’ juncture for the peace process.

Having entered the June 12th general elections in the shadow of weapons, the BDP prepares for the upcoming local elections with more normalized conditions thanks to the peace process. The BDP nominated its own candidates in the East and the Southeast region of Turkey and is supporting People’s Democratic Party (HDP) candidates in the western provinces. The HDP joined Turkey’s political life on October 15, 2013 as part of Öcalan’s vision for the Kurdish political movement to have a nationwide appeal. Although the voter base of the BDP does not give much credit to the HDP, the election performance of this new party will be decisive for its own political future.

BDP’s Election Leverages

One of the obstacles preventing the resolution of the Kurdish issue has been the division among Kurdish actors, such as the PKK, the BDP and Abdullah Öcalan. However, the ongoing peace process solved this issue by putting Öcalan at

the center and giving the BDP the role of coordinator between the Kurdish political movement and the state. This development increased the BDP’s capability to conduct politics in relatively normal conditions.

In such an environment, the BDP will build upon its election campaign with the concept of “democratic autonomy,” which was first mentioned by Abdullah Öcalan in order to give Kurds space to enjoy some sort of autonomy from the centralized government. A BDP delegation met with Öcalan on March 9, 2014 and declared his message to the public: “Local elections on March 30 will be in the nature of a referendum for the Kurds” in order to test their democratic autonomy.²⁵ Although the BDP plans to market this move as a rupture against the heavily centralized structure of Turkey’s administrative system, the general public interprets it within the PKK’s secessionist past as a preliminary step toward an independent Kurdistan. As a result, the BDP’s election partner, the HDP, started to be attacked in western provinces.²⁶

Moreover, the BDP enjoys the comfortable environment created by the peace process more than the AK Party in Kurdish majority provinces. The party considers the local election results to be a ‘make or break’ juncture for the peace process. Gülten Kışanak, the co-chair of the BDP and a mayoral candidate in Diyarbakir explained, “There is a feeling that if ... we achieve a stronger (election) result, the peace process will advance. However, if we relax and our votes decline, we Kurds fear that the peace process could collapse.”²⁷ In this regard, the March 30th local elections will signify the political consequence of

25. <http://gundem.milliyet.com.tr/30-mart-kurtler-icin-referandum/gundem/detay/1849142/default.htm>

26. <http://www.dailysabah.com/nation/2014/03/10/prokurdish-party-targeted-by-ultranationalist-group>

27. http://en.cihan.com.tr/news/Turkey-local-election-holds-key-to-Kurdish-peace-talks_5271-CHMTM3NTI3MS8xMDA1

the ongoing peace process. On the one hand, the BDP embraces the process as the inevitable outcome of a 30-year struggle. On the other hand, the AK Party implemented serious reforms, such as lifting the bans on the Kurdish language, political freedoms, and identity, which may increase the ruling party's votes.

Another pioneering move of the BDP is to initiate the co-leadership model in every municipal through which the representation of women materialized. Having applied and succeeded with this model in the party, the BDP introduced a new gender equality based understanding of governing to Turkey's political life.

Resonating with Turkey's recent political agenda, the BDP preferred to nominate high profile candidates. The candidacies of the party's heavyweights such as Gülten Kışanak, co-leader of the party, in Diyarbakır, Ahmet Türk, veteran Kurdish politician, in Mardin, and Sırrı Sakık in Ağrı shows the BDP's intention to politicize the local elections, which would normally showcase candidates with service-oriented campaign promises. Furthermore, the BDP's prestigious Diyarbakır mayor, Osman Baydemir, was nominated for Şanlıurfa, where the AK Party is very powerful. This indicates the BDP's strategy to close the vote gap in order to give the impression that the BDP is the only actor in the Kurdish majority regions.

To sum up, the local elections on March 30th constitute an important turning point for Turkey's political future. The peace process will be the main determinant for Kurdish citizens. The BDP also aspires to capitalize on the political energy created by the Gezi protests through its new established affiliate, the HDP. Having established a different and more sophisticated election campaign than other political parties, the BDP aims to increase its share of the vote and number of municipalities, which will help the party present itself as an indispensable actor in Turkey's political life.

THE LEGACY OF THE GEZİ PROTESTS

The Gezi Protest was one of the most striking social-political developments in Turkey in recent years, revealing serious social fault lines. The political residue of the protest and its aftermath will likely occupy Turkey's future social-political agenda. . What had started in late May 2013 as a protest against The Taksim Square Pedestrianization Project of Gezi Park, located in Istanbul's Beyoğlu District, turned into a widespread anti-government rally, drawing immediate national and international attention.

Generally, the outbreak and development of the Gezi Protest can be broken down into three phases: the onset, the politization, and the weakening. The "onset" phase corresponds to the initial protests by a limited number of activists protesting against the project for the pedestrianization of Taksim Square. The "politization" phase covers the two-week period from June 1, 2013 to June 15, 2013 during which the Gezi Protest reached its peak. After the harsh intervention of the police against the protestors, it turned into an anti-government rally that clearly included more general claims and demands beyond the earlier grievances against the Gezi Park project. During this phase, as the protests morphed into direct clashes and confrontation between protesters and police, the streets became inaccessible and routine daily life ceased in the affected areas. The "weakening" phase reflected the decline and the decrease of the protesters' influence, following the police intervention in Gezi Park of June 15, 2013. As of that day, most protesters reverted back to peaceful activities and engaged in public forums and independent political activism, mobilization, and campaigning.²⁸

Heated and intense discussions have been held on how to define the protest(er)s since the

28. You may find a more detailed report on the Gezi Protest in SETA Foundation's study:

very beginning of the demonstrations. Political positions, opinions, and attitudes changed in reaction to the protests; new political alliances were formed; and novel conceptual discourses were expressed. An intensive and effective intellectual process was conceived to shape and influence the public perception of the protests from the very outset of the demonstrations. Those who supported the protests view the general motivation of the protesters as democratic, civilian, and peaceful. However, those in the second group viewed the protesters as anti-democratic and looked at the protests as a “coup attempt” against the government. This discursive struggle between these two groups continued well after the protests ended.

Before the March 30 local elections, careful consideration should be given to the facts that surround this transformative social event while analyzing the political legacy of the Gezi Park Protest. Particularly, those who supported the Gezi Park Protest have clung to the initial image of the peaceful environmental protestors and thus have adopted a conscious strategy to ignore the political and social events that unfurled in the later phases of the protests. Even after it became apparent that for some of the most vocal and disruptive groups there were ulterior and destabilizing motives, certain social groups hold steadfast to the initial image. Indeed, for many the idealized picture of the early days of the demonstrations has been “frozen in time” although the profile of the protesters and their motivations have evolved. Moreover, the image of the protest(er)s have remained fluid to develop a seemingly homogenous opposition front against the ruling party. It is, therefore, necessary to analyze the political content and context of the Gezi Park Protest and to discuss the political legacy of this watershed event.

Moreover, in the context of the December 2014 corruption probe of the AKP Government, those who defended the probe, even if they had

been targeted by certain illegal activities of the protesters, began to side with the protesters anti-government stance. As the political implications of the probe outweighed the actual judicial process, the whole initiative has begun to look like another politically engineered attempt to bring down the AKP government without having recourse to fair and democratic elections. From the perspective of AK Party supporters, the later phases of the Gezi Protest and the corruption probe have been packaged to stir up further social unrest and incite people to taking to the streets. This social-political polarization will definitely be reflected in the March 30th local elections. All political parties in Turkey will use the same political events to justify their positions but with vehemently contrasting discourses.

All political parties in Turkey have positioned themselves in regards to the Gezi Protest, either for or against. On one side of the fence, the two main political actors that have positively embraced the political legacy and legitimacy of the Gezi events are Turkey’s nationalist-secular main opposition, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), and the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). The Gezi Protest was a wake-up call for the main opposition parties, having fundamental repercussions on their domestic and foreign policy. The CHP deputies started to take the stage during the protests and carried out foreign visits to keep the “Gezi mood” alive.²⁹ The BDP leadership along with their election partner, the People’s Democratic Party (HDP) embraced the Gezi events. However, an important distinction must be made on the position of the BDP towards the corruption probe of the the AKP government. The BDP is not using the corruption allegations as a part of its election strategy. The reason for not doing so is very simple: the BDP supports the ongoing

29. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-opposition-live-and-kicking.aspx?pageID=517&nID=62087&NewsCatID=409>

Peace Process, which began in 2012, to bring a peaceful conclusion to the Kurdish issue. This peace process is one of the hallmarks of the current AKP government. Still, another main opposition party, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) which had pursued a comparatively silent opposition during the Gezi events, is now opposing Prime Minister Erdoğan and the AK Party based on the corruption accusations.

On the other side of the fence is the AK Party, who mostly regards the Gezi Protest as an attempt to destabilize and undermine the democratic process and the electoral position of the strength that the AK Party has enjoyed for the past decade or more.

Although the outcome of the local elections scheduled for March 30 will mostly likely confirm the previous electoral victories of the AK Party, the Gezi Protest have left a mark on Turkey's political agenda. Moreover, these protests have now given Prime Minister Erdoğan an authoritarian reputation on top of his already politically conservative one; strengthening the image that Erdogan has a heavy hand approach rather than a democratic one. In addition, political measures were taken by the government immediately after the December 17 corruption probe to stem the potential of a state within the state from undermining the elected government. The government passed legislation on the restructuring of the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK), essentially making the justice minister more powerful, as the head of the Council. Thus, placing political power over the judiciary. Also, an internet law was passed to prevent illegal wiretappings from being disseminated, which is essentially the source of most of the corruption allegations, charges, and arrests. A board could take immediate action upon complaint of a release of an illegal recording. These measures are being criticized by the opposition and other political groups in Turkey as the government interfering in the judicial structure and tying the

hands of the judges and courts. The internet law is being condemned as a form of censorship in order to mobilize the streets.

Although it has been 10 months after the Gezi Protest, the political and societal legacy of these events is still very vivid in the minds of most Turks. It seems that it will continue to occupy the political discourse given recent developments. Recently, there have been trigger events that have exacerbated the frustration among groups in Turkish society that feel excluded, marginalized, and disregarded politically. The death of 15-year old boy Berkin Elvan, on March 11, 2014 who was injured during the Gezi Protest, and the subsequent death of an Alawite youth who was demonstrating because of the other boy's death, added fuel to the fire of the already heated streets.

Although the outcome of the local elections scheduled for March 30 will mostly likely confirm the previous electoral victories of the AK Party, the Gezi Protest have left a mark on Turkey's political agenda.

To sum up, there are two main scenarios for Turkey — both of which will directly influence the election results. AK Party supporters are predisposed to see both the Gezi Protest and corruption investigation as attempts to tarnish the AK Party's image just before the upcoming elections.³⁰ On the one hand, if the AK Party tries to cover up the allegations regarding these two major events, it may harm the very basis that its political success depends upon: the democratization process. On the other hand, if the govern-

30. <http://www.fairobserver.com/article/turkeys-corruption-crisis-political-probe>

ment can work with those who feel disenfranchised and thus took part in the Gezi Protest to find a democratic conduit for their grievances and if the former ministers that were accused of corruption actually do go through true court proceedings to determine the veracity of their guilt – then the AK Party will show its domestic electorate and the international community that it is abiding by the democratic process it has touted as one of its greatest achievements for a new Turkey.

Turkey is passing through a bend in the road. While polarization between the parties still exists, they have espoused the zeitgeist (the spirit of the times) to enable Turkey to go beyond the status quo.

THE EFFECTS OF PEACE PROCESS

Turkey's Kurdish issue is on the verge of a paradigm shift. An ongoing conflictual state that dates back to the establishment of the Republic. After the failure of the "Democratic Opening" initiatives of 2005 and 2009, the year 2013 brought a fresh start. Hopes were high that dialogue would resolve the conflictual atmosphere stemming from this protracted armed struggle. Thus, the Kurdish Peace Process has become Turkey's most important agenda item in 2013. Indeed, "the Peace Process," represents a significant political move for Turkey and it has led the country to experience a golden year in terms of the Kurdish issue.

What sparked the peace process was the government's recognition that it was impossible

to maintain the status quo regarding the Kurdish issue both internally and externally. This led the Turkish government to accept to deal with the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) to end the armed struggle. In this regard, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan came up with a plan where he would no longer fight for an independent Kurdistan but would accept the recognition of Kurdish rights through Turkey's democratization process. He was, thus, able to persuade the acting leadership of the PKK to come up with strategic changes that would be in "harmony" with the new circumstances.

In terms of the regional dynamics of the process, the Syrian conflict and the crisis in Iraq between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Maliki regime produced a situation that could result in a fundamental shift in the leadership and program of the PKK. "As the crisis in Syria and Iraq deepened, it was realised that the PKK's loyalty to Öcalan and to its long-lasting principle of territorial integrity of Turkey was at risk. Ostensibly, this was in the interest of neither Öcalan, nor the PKK, and certainly not in the Turkish state's interest."³¹

The AK Party's intention to abandon the existing approach to the Kurdish issue did not abruptly come out of nowhere in 2013. There have been previous attempts during the AK Party era, especially in 2005 and 2009. However, no other attempt has raised the level of confidence more than this current ongoing process. For the first time, peace with the Kurds seems to be within the reach of a political solution, despite the drawbacks of the process.

In 2005, PM Erdoğan declared in a rally held in Diyarbakır that the Turkish state had made mistakes in the past on the Kurdish issue. He added that more democracy, not more repression, was the answer to the Kurds' long-running

31. <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2014/01/201411671922659187.htm>

grievances.³² Actions have followed the words and a long-term reform process has started.

One of the main pillars of the process was to bring Abdullah Öcalan to the center. The BDP acceded to the peace process after 2012, one of the bloodiest years of this infamous conflict, while establishing a shuttle diplomacy between Öcalan and the PKK. The Kurdish political movement removed the language of “the armed struggle” from its agenda and accepted to coordinate the process with the Turkish government. In a nutshell, the BDP understood the value of agreeing to a political solution and reduced the level of criticism in major events taking place in Turkey, most strikingly during the Gezi Protest and the December 17 probe. The BDP chose the path of articulating the thoughts, needs, and feelings of its core constituency, the Kurdish population, rather than addressing the streets. Thus, the BDP backed the democratization of the country and the strengthening of its political institutions.

Turkey is passing through a bend in the road. While polarization between the parties still exists, they have espoused the *zeitgeist* (the spirit of the times) to enable Turkey to go beyond the status quo. The combination of the Kurdish people’s longing for peace and Turkey’s having reached a period of civil peace, economic prosperity, and democratic progress came to fruition with Öcalan and Erdoğan agreeing to make the necessary compromises for the peace process.

Due to this assertive development, both political actors and public opinion backed the peace process in surprisingly high numbers. However, due to increased tensions, as the local elections of March 30th, 2014 close in and because of recent political developments (i.e: the Gezi Protest and the Corruption Scandals), the process seems to be under threat once again. The very thing that sparked the peaceful negotiations has the potential to become a threat to the process. Demirtaş’s

recent speeches and interviews with the PKK’s leadership shows that the Kurdish movement appears to be moving away from the political sensitivity shown during the Gezi protests and the Dec. 17 probe.

The latest developments in Turkey have brought Turkey back to the centralization and personalization of politics. This trend has raised questions and concerns regarding the process; whether it will continue or end? Past experiences, such as the Habur incidence in 2009 and the bloody two years following the PKK’s infamous Silvan attack are still fresh. Moreover, election periods have always led to an escalation of the conflict. Therefore, both sides of the negotiation table should keep this in mind. Besides, as Galip Dalay of SETA Foundation states, “the government should be clearer and bolder in its reform plans in order to ease tensions.”³³

Inevitably, the current political atmosphere makes the BDP skeptical about the future of the peace process. Nevertheless, the BDP has to stand behind the process while concentrating on enlarging the topics to be included and keeping engaged the parties to the negotiation within the context of democratization of the country, rather than being skeptical on whether the government will follow through with the negotiations or not. Although the BDP criticizes the government for not taking urgent and necessary measures to successfully conclude the peace process, it underestimates the steps taken by the government in its democratization package, such as decreasing long detention periods and abolishing the notorious Specially Authorized Courts. Furthermore, the Parliament passed laws as a move that could invigorate relations between Ankara and the Kurds. Despite certain caveats, the package allows for education in private schools and political campaigning to be conducted in languages

32. <http://www.economist.com/node/4300168>

33. http://www.gmfus.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files_mf/1393950707Dalay_RevisitingKurdishPeaceProcess_Mar14.pdf

other than Turkish. It also allows former non-Turkish names of villages and neighborhoods to be reinstated. The BDP claims that the new rules were already practiced among Kurds, however, there are still some cases pending against Kurdish politicians for greeting people in the Kurdish language during election campaigns.

It is worth mentioning that the AK Party, Öcalan, the Kurdish Communities Union (KCK), and the rest of the parties involved with the peace process are still as vested as they were in early 2013. The process has continued without any major setbacks. In this regard, the BDP-PKK line should align their positions according to upcoming developments in the process, including the disarmament of the PKK. In an atmosphere where the Kurdish issue is interpreted as Turkey's most important political problem without the terror factor, the BDP's responsibility is steadfastly increasing. The peace process reflects a will to resolve the longstanding Kurdish issue and has created a new form of language of political communication. Prior to the upcoming elections, if both the government and the BDP hold their ground in favor of the peace process and maintain a responsible attitude they can fend off this most recent politically engineered challenge. All that is needed is Turkish and Kurdish public support and a little common sense.

PRO-GÜLEN BUREAUCRATIC ASSAULT ON POLITICS

Turkey has been experiencing a fierce power struggle between the governing Justice and Development Party (JDP) and the Gülen Movement. The latter is a religious group headed by the Islamic cleric Fethullah Gülen, who has been residing in the US since 1999. The struggle that has gained extensive national and international prominence with the graft probe of December

17 is not the first instance of a feud taking place between these two Turkish-Islamic groups. In fact, it is the latest form of a discord that goes back a number of years.

Still, a religious group initiating a struggle of such nature and magnitude against a highly popular and strong government is not only a novelty in Turkey's political history, but probably has few parallels, if any, in other democratic countries. Furthermore, the fact that this power struggle is taking place between an elected, accountable, and visible civilian government and an unelected, democratically unaccountable, and opaque organization renders it intriguing and unique.³⁴ Thus far, various explanations have been formulated and factors cited to account for this feud. Yet, a thorough examination of the discord needs to take into account all dimensions of the struggle, judicial and political, as well as the historical background and the context in which the events are taking place.

Judicial Aspect of the Probe

Even though the essence of the current events engulfing Turkey is political, the corruption allegations should not be overlooked and dismissed. The public has legitimate concerns over the corruption aspect of this struggle and the government has yet to effectively respond to them in an orderly manner. In this regard, the belated replacement of cabinet ministers, whose sons were detained and names involved in the graft probe, on December 25 was a move in the right direction.³⁵ However, this step alone is insufficient. More needs to be done in this respect in order to satisfy and alleviate people's concerns.

34. See, Galip Dalay, "The Structural Roots of Turkey's Power Struggle," GMF on Turkey Series, *German Marshall Fund*, February 04, 2014, <http://www.gmfus.org/archives/the-structural-roots-of-turkeys-power-struggle/>

35. "Turkish ministers resign over fraud probe," *Al Jazeera*, December 25, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2013/12/turkish-minister-resigns-over-graft-probe-20131225735397163.html>

This is not only necessary within the context of the current power struggle, but it is also imperative in order to salvage Turkey's improving international reputation regarding transparency and commitment to fight against corruption. To put it differently, Turkey has significantly improved its level of transparency over the last-decade, a fact that was well reflected by the Berlin-Based Transparency International, an institute that ranks countries according to their level of transparency, accountability, and fight against corruption. According to its figures, while Turkey scored 64 out of 102 countries in 2002³⁶, it ranked 53 out of 177 countries in 2013.³⁷ This upward mobility in the level of transparency was a significant factor in attracting foreign investment and insuring investors' confidence in Turkey's public administration. To continue on this path, the government needs to ensure that the corruption aspect of the recent events is properly investigated.

That said, however, focusing exclusively on the judicial aspect of the cases and developments in Turkey is akin to losing the sight of the bigger picture. The graft probe and ensuing developments are the latest altercation in a row that has been going on in the last couple years between the Gülen Movement and the governing AK Party.³⁸ While the context in which the probe and subsequent developments are taking place points to the 'political' nature of the investigation and the feud, the way in which the investigation has been conducted and the form that the struggle between the sides has taken reveal the existence of an 'autonomous Gülenist structure' within the Turkish state.³⁹

36. "Corruption Perceptions Index 2002," *Transparency International*, 2002, http://archive.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2002

37. "Corruption Perceptions Index 2013," *Transparency International*, 2013, <http://www.transparency.org/country#TUR>

38. See, Levent Baştürk, "The clash of allies: The AK Party vs Gülen Movement II," *World Bulletin*, December 31, 2013, <http://www.worldbulletin.net/?aType=haber&ArticleID=125827>

39. See, Galip Dalay, "Turkey's parallel state strikes back," *Al Jazeera*, January 6, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/01/turkey-parallel-state-strikes-back-20141545517864901.html>

Followers of the Gülen Movement commenced a social media campaign against the government. Threats of leaking government officials or pro-government public personalities' voice recordings or sex tapes to the media went hand in hand with other types of blackmail.

The Political Aspect of the Probe and Power Struggle

The string of developments that resulted in the sensational graft probe primarily began with the debate over the closure of private tutoring schools. On different instances, the AK Party expressed its vision of reshuffling or transforming Turkey's private tutoring school system, believing that it puts unnecessary pressure on pupils and financially burdens families in its current form. Yet, this position had not been expressed until November 2013, when Prime Minister Erdoğan and the Minister of Education said that the government was working on a draft proposal for transforming/closing down private tutoring school system in earnest.⁴⁰ Owning a quarter of all private tutoring schools in Turkey, the Gülen Movement regarded this move as an attempt to deal a calamitous blow to its organizational structure, as these prep schools provide its main source of revenue and recruits. As such, it voiced strong objection to this initiative and pursued a multi-pronged campaign to stifle it.⁴¹

First, it utilized its vast media presence to dissuade the government from going forward with the initiative. Yet, this media campaign did

40. "Government's proposal on test prep centers causes row," *Hurriyet Daily News*, November 15, 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/governments-proposal-on-test-prep-centers-causes-row.aspx?pageID=238&nID=57997&NewsCatID=338>

41. Galip Dalay, "Turkey's parallel state strikes back," *Al Jazeera*, January 6, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/01/turkey-parallel-state-strikes-back-20141545517864901.html>

not yield the desired result. Then, the Movement started to portray the decision as part of an effort by the government to finish them off. To that effect, they started to leak classified documents from the National Security Council Meeting in 2004 to the media, in which the government supposedly bowed to military pressure to terminate the Movement.⁴² But this claim was in contradiction with the reality on the ground. The movement had grown exponentially since 2004. This fact was even expressed by the Chairman of Journalists and Writers' Foundation, an official organization of the Gülen Movement where Fethullah Gülen himself serves as honorary chairman, in an interview with *Taraf* daily in 2012 where he described the AK Party era as being the Movement's most comfortable period.⁴³

One of the defining attributes of these struggles has been the tendency of the Gülen Movement to orchestrate its followers within the police and judiciary to attain its goals or pressure and "tame" the government.

In tandem, followers of the Gülen Movement commenced a social media campaign against the government. Threats of leaking government officials or pro-government public personalities' voice recordings or sex tapes to the media went hand in hand with other types of blackmail. Several tapes, irrespective of whether they were genuine or photomontages, have indeed been leaked through YouTube and other

42. Ibid.

43. See the interview, Neşe Düzel, "Mustafa Yeşil: Hocaefendi iki kişiyi önerdi," *Taraf*, May 8, 2012, <http://www.taraf.com.tr/yazilar/nese-duzel/mustafa-yesil-hocaefendi-iki-kisiyi-onerdi/21263/>

social media channels.⁴⁴ Attempts of political engineering through video tapes or other forms of blackmail isn't a novelty in Turkish politics. The former chairman of Turkey's main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), Deniz Baykal, lost his post as a result of the leakage of such a video tape in 2010.⁴⁵ Likewise, in 2011, tapes of 10 high ranking officials of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) were leaked to the public, resulting in the resignation of many of these public figures. In response, the leader of the MHP, Devlet Bahçeli, portrayed this move as an attempt to reorient his party and explicitly blamed the Gülen Movement for the leaks.⁴⁶ Hence, engineering the political scene through video tapes, voice recordings, and blackmail has a political history in Turkey, which is by and large associated with the Gülen Movement.

Despite this pressure, the government pressed ahead with its decision to close down private tutoring schools. That heightened the already tense relations between the government and the Gülen Movement. The sensational graft probe of December 17th emerged from such a background. The probe merged three separate and unrelated cases into a single file. In addition, despite the fact that the necessary evidence had been collected almost six months ago,⁴⁷ the prosecutors waited until December to launch the investigation. That confirmed the suspicions of many people who regard this case as being driven by an election sensitive calendar, as local elections

44. Galip Dalay, "Turkey's parallel state strikes back," *Al Jazeera*, January 6, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/01/turkey-parallel-state-strikes-back-20141545517864901.html>

45. "Turkey's main opposition leader quits amid video scandal," *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 10, 2010, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=chp-leader-quits-amid-video-scandal-2010-05-10>

46. "Gülen should return to Turkey, Bahçeli says," *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 12, 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=state-inaction-to-stop-tape-scandal-argues-bahceli-2011-05-12>

47. "Türkiye'nin beklediği açıklama," *Hürriyet*, December 18, 2013, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/25392771.asp>

are due in March 2014, to inflict more damage on the AK Party.

All in all, the fact that this probe came after more than a month of a heated row between the Gülen Movement and the government over the closure of private tutoring schools, bundled three separate cases into a single file, and utilized an election sensitive calendar to initiate the probe and subsequent developments testify to the 'political' nature of the probe. Therefore, the prevalent view among widea spectrum of commentators in Turkey is that this probe is not a "clean hands operation;" rather, it is a political vendetta by the Gülen Movement against the government.

Emergence of an Autonomous Gülenist Structure Within the State

As this corruption case is seen as part of a 'power struggle' between the government and the Gülen Movement by both Turkish⁴⁸ and international observers,⁴⁹ the nature in which the graft probe has been conducted and the historical context of the row between both sides illustrates the existence of an autonomous Gülenist group within the bureaucracy, especially in the police and judiciary, with their own agenda. This is not the first instance of discord between both sides. The struggle between these two parties has taken various forms thus far. One of the defining attributes of these struggles has been the tendency of the Gülen Movement to orchestrate its followers within the police and judiciary to attain its goals or pressure and "tame" the government.

The first public contestation between these two parties took place in February 2012. Turkey's Intelligence Chief, Hakan Fidan, was summoned to court for his role in conducting secret nego-

tiations with the Kurdistan Worker Party (PKK) for a peaceful resolution to the Kurdish issue. He had been entrusted the task by Prime Minister Erdoğan. The Gülen Movement holds a negative view of a negotiated settlement and it is widely believed that it used its presence within the judiciary and police to disrupt the process.⁵⁰

This and similar instances in which the Gülen Movement orchestrates its presence within the state to reach its group goals and intimidate rivals only confirms the widely shared belief in Turkey that the Movement has formed an autonomous structure within the state.

Conclusion

Turkey's graft probe, as clearly illustrated by the ensuing developments, is a politically-motivated case, but that alone does not dent the legitimacy of the case. A corruption case, for that reason any other case, can be pursued with a political motivation. Hence, irrespective of motivations behind the case, these cases need to be duly, transparently, and convincingly investigated.

Yet, the historical background and the context in which this power struggle took place pointed to the political nature of the probe and the existence of a Gülenist autonomous structure within the state. The ensuing events, after December 17, 2014 have only confirmed these two aspects. The fact that the Movement could eavesdrop on the encrypted secure lines used by the prime minister, cabinet ministers, and the Chief of National Intelligence demonstrates the level of threat posed by the Movement to Turkey's politics.

Moreover, as published by various newspapers, the fact that the Movement, by utilizing its presence within the state apparatus, wiretapped thousands of people, including top bureaucrats, journalists, businessmen, politicians, academ-

48. "AKP - Cemaat geriliminin arkasında ne var?" (What is behind AK Party-Gülen Movement tension?), *BBC Türkçe*, November 19, 2013 http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkce/haberler/131118_canli_akp_gulen_cemaati.shtml

49. "Power struggle weakens Erdogan," *Deutsche Welle*, December 21, 2013, <http://www.dw.de/power-struggle-weakens-erdogan/a-17314908>

50. "Turkey's political in-fighting: Erdogan at bay," *The Economist*, February 25, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21548261>

ics, think tankers, for three years has only glaringly demonstrated that it isn't only Turkey's political elites that should be concerned about the threat posed by the Movement. This nature of the Gülen Movement and its political activities presents a grave danger to Turkey's democracy, civilian politics, and people's right to privacy. As such, the government, by remaining within lawful boundaries, should take actions against the Movement, deconstruct the autonomous structure that it has built within the state, and push it back into the civilian sphere.

FOREIGN POLICY AND LOCAL ELECTIONS

Turkey is approaching a critical turning point in its history, as it is getting ready for two different and significant elections: the local elections in March 2014 and the first ever presidential election by popular vote in August. The elections are significant for the future of domestic politics and economics in Turkey. Although the local elections are mayoral races in Turkey, it has become almost a referendum on the legitimacy of the government due to the political crisis after the operation of December 17th 2014. The outcome of the elections will not only determine the mayors of the municipalities in different cities and townships, but will also represent the response of the electorate to the allegations that were put forward after December 17th. In the case of an electoral victory, the AK Party government will acquire a significant source of legitimacy amid the political crisis.

However, despite the current preeminence of domestic political issues and the lack of coverage of foreign policy issues in political campaigns, these two elections will have important repercussions on Turkey's foreign policy. The election results may have a significant impact on the direction of several foreign policy issues.

Among the many different developments related to issues and countries in Turkey's neighborhood, Ankara's relations with the US and the EU, the outcome of the Syrian crisis, the tension with Iraq, the Cyprus question, Iran and a potential normalization of relations with Israel will be the most significant concerns to be discussed. Although some of these issues may not be as polarizing as domestic political problems, they nevertheless may create significant debate during the campaign and after the elections.

In the last three years, an increasing degree of domestication emerged in several foreign policy issues. Domestication in Turkey, however, needs to be interpreted differently than the potential impact of foreign policy issues on domestic politics and hence electoral campaigns. There has been a serious transformation in the role of foreign relations in shaping the political discourse of opposition parties and groups. For example, Turkey's relations with the US have generated a paradoxical situation in recent years for opposition groups and political parties. This change partly emerged due to the lack of legitimacy of the opposition parties because of their failure to win elections and an inability to develop an appealing discourse against the AK Party that would mobilize the electorate. Under these circumstances, the same people that criticized the AK Party government for being too subservient to US interests and goals in the Middle East, also started to criticize the AK Party's policies to the officials in Washington in order to create indirect pressure against Ankara. By these actions, segments of the opposition have hoped to find a strategy to win the White House's support.

During this election season, we have witnessed this type of interpretation of statements made by the US regarding the developments in Turkey. The opposition has frequently extracted and magnified critical statements from members of the Obama administration to use as an instrument of a political campaign. However, in recent

months, the volume of these political campaign messages increased dramatically. For instance, this was evident regarding the conversation between President Obama and Prime Minister Erdogan. Again, the same people who criticized the personal rapport between Obama and Erdogan as a sign of weakness on the part of Turkish foreign policy, started commenting on the reduced number of meetings between the two leaders as a sign of the US' position regarding domestic developments in Turkey. When the two leaders talked about regional issues in the midst of the crisis, it created disappointment among the opposition. Although US-Turkish relations have multiple dimensions, this significant pillar of the relationship has never been discussed and there is no position articulated in regards to this very important element of bilateral relations. Other than routine statements in the foreign policy section of party programs, the opposition has yet to develop powerful and consistent strategies on this issue and criticism of US foreign policy do not offer any concrete alternatives.

Another significant subject, which may be an issue of debate in this election season, is the crisis in Syria. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, Turkey has played one of the most assertive roles in the region. With the evolution of the political crisis into a humanitarian one due to the excessive use of force by the Syrian regime and increasing militarization of the conflict, Turkey took a tougher stance on Syria and started actively endorsing the opposition. Meanwhile, potential domestic impacts of the Syrian crisis emerged in Turkey. On the one hand, the humanitarian crises led to a huge refugee flow into Turkey, which brought with it significant economic costs and domestic tensions. The severing of trade with Syria also contributed to the increasing economic cost of the war. On the other hand, the conflict in Syria started to spread to Turkish territory. The Reyhanli bombing and the casualties in border towns due to shelling by the Syrian regime forces

created domestic ambivalence about Syria, which has been capitalized on by some opposition groups. For months, the Turkish government was harshly criticized for its actions by various groups and political parties. For instance, members of the CHP parliamentary group visited Assad during the clashes and harshly criticized Turkey's support for the opposition.

Despite the current preeminence of domestic political issues and the lack of coverage of foreign policy issues in political campaigns, these two elections will have important repercussions on Turkey's foreign policy.

Together with Syria, Ankara's relations with Iran may become a contested issue in the elections. Previous allegations from the opposition regarding Iran's influence over the AK Party administration have resurfaced, once again, in the aftermath of the December 17th operation. For instance, the nuclear deal that Turkey brokered with Brazil and its "no" vote on the UN Security Council resolution on sanctions were frequently mentioned by opposition parties. During recent debates, PM Erdogan's visit to Iran has almost become a campaign issue, despite the \$35 billion deal that the two countries signed. In the coming weeks and months, this issue may be brought up more frequently and put on the agenda by political parties and groups that are critical of Turkey's relations with Iran.

The relationship between Turkey and the EU and Turkey's integration process may also become a political campaign issue during the elections. Some liberal observers of Turkish foreign policy have criticized the slow down in the process in recent years. However, PM Erdogan's

recent visit to Brussels and meetings with EU officials demonstrate a possible jump-start in the negotiations. During this process, however, the EU Commission's reports and statements by members of the EU Parliament could potentially become a major campaign instrument for opposition parties. Nevertheless, we will witness the same paradox that we have seen in regards to Turkish-US relations, in the sense that a rapid development in Turkish-EU relations could be a source of criticism for the opposition as well.

The problem is that despite the criticisms of the AK Party government regarding these issue areas, there are no viable alternatives proposed by the opposition parties.

Recent developments in Cyprus are another potential issue for significant foreign policy debates among the parties and campaigns. The revitalization of the process could bring the topic to the agenda of opposition parties. Both the CHP and MHP are known to have very strong positions and both parties have members familiar with the issue. Although there is no alternative plan about the resolution of the crisis offered by the opposition, there is a sizable number of the public who are sensitive to the nature of the problem.

Another, probably less polarizing issue is potentially the reset of relations that could take place with Israel during the election period. After the formal apology of the Israeli government and rumors regarding the agreement on reparation for the families of the victims, the two countries could mend their ties. The logistical issues regarding the transport of natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean could create an arena of cooperation for the two countries. However, in

the possible case of another Israeli operation in Gaza or the declaration of new settlements in the West Bank, the Turkish government may find itself under immense pressure from the public, which could be exploited by opposition parties.

In the rapidly changing and unstable regions around Turkey, new developments could become a source of foreign policy debate during the elections. For instance, the sensitivity of the MHP to Turkish minorities in different countries could bring the Crimean issue to the agenda during the elections due to the Tatar minority in the region. Moreover, an increasing degree of pressure over the Uyghurs in East Turkistan or Turkmens in Syria could be brought to the agenda by these political parties, as well as opposition groups. The problem is that despite the criticisms of the AK Party government regarding these issue areas, there are no viable alternatives proposed by the opposition parties. The CHP delegation's visits to different countries, including a visit by Kemal Kilicdaroglu to the US, are a sign that these parties are interested in foreign policy issues. However, they have not provided any roadmap or plan of action in regards to the topics that they are critical about. No remarkable White Paper or recommendation has been offered to the Turkish government. In the absence of any alternative, any criticism is bound to be just rhetorical attacks on the government's position. This negatively impacts the overall quality of the foreign policy debate in Turkey. Therefore, foreign policy is not an exception to the general rule that the Turkish public feels a lack of a credible and formidable opposition.

CONCLUSION

As we have analyzed in this report, all of the parties are going into local elections with national issues at the forefront of their campaign themes and strategies. The ruling AK Party has focused on the Gülen movement's abuse of state power

(illegal wiretappings, networks created outside the state hierarchy, judicial hold over the political system) and the Kurdish peace process as election campaign themes, while nominating party heavyweights as municipal candidates. Its strategy hinges on increasing its overall share of the vote in order to ensure that the party's potential candidate for the presidency wins in August. Protection of the perception of electoral invincibility is crucial for the party heading into parliamentary elections in 2015. If the party succeeds in the local elections and its candidate wins the presidency, it will have a comfortable race in the general election in 2015, which will be crucial in managing the transition to the next generation of upper level party cadres.

The main opposition party, the CHP, intends to argue that this is the beginning of the end for the ruling AK Party by taking advantage of the perceived damage the government suffered in the wake of the Gezi Park protests and the December 17th operations. If this strategy does not work, the intra-party struggles will become ever sharper and we may see serious fights endangering splits within the party. In the short run, the party is likely to remain united against an AK Party presidential candidate. If the party shows reasonable strength in the local elections and its presidential candidate puts up a serious challenge to the AK Party candidate, the CHP may be able to transform itself into a more center-right party under Kılıçdaroğlu. However, if it is seen as having failed in both local elections and the presidential election, Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership may be endangered.

The MHP is looking to capitalize not only on the corruption allegations, utilizing a similar platform as the CHP, but also on the nationalist opposition to the Kurdish resolution process. The MHP's success in local elections will embolden its discourse about endangering the unity of the state. The party would present success as confirmation of its position on the Kurdish question as a project

to divide the country. However, the party would have to make a very strong showing to make this point because there is already substantial and sustainable opposition to the peace process from certain segments of society. The MHP can only hope to be part of a coalition government in the general election in 2015, but the AK Party would have to suffer a serious defeat for this to happen. For the short and medium-term, the MHP's strategy will resign itself to representing the nationalist reaction against the Kurdish peace process. If the peace process is derailed, the MHP will present the failure as confirmation of its platform.

The BDP's challenge is to show that it remains the single representative of the Kurdish political movement and it can compete in an environment where there is no violence. Through the establishment of the HDP, which it may join in the future, the BDP has invested in a long-term strategy to transform itself into a party with national appeal, instead of being confined to Kurdish majority cities and large cities with considerable Kurdish minority populations. As is proven by the party's leadership running for municipal mayors, the BDP aims to broaden its electoral base and make itself a viable party beyond Kurdish majority localities. Its main contender in Kurdish-majority regions is the AK Party and the BDP wants to ensure that the credit for the initiation of the peace process does not go to the AK Party. In other words, the BDP presents the peace process as the achievement of the Kurdish political movement rather than the AK Party's initiative. Losing its votes to the AK Party is a serious danger for the BDP and it seeks to avoid such a prospect to strengthen its hand in negotiations with the government over the Kurdish issue.

Turkey's upcoming election cycle will be consequential not only for the future of individual parties but also for the overall democratization of the country. The local elections have already been transformed into a vote of confidence for

the ruling AK Party. When we look at the issues discussed, campaign strategies, and selection of municipal candidates, it is impossible to argue that the March 30th elections are mere local elections in the traditional sense. The outcome of the elections will most certainly determine the presidential candidate of both the ruling party and the opposition parties. Despite lacking executive power, the office of the Turkish presidency has always stirred heated debates and triggered serious political fights. The presidency has functioned as the cornerstone of the tutelary system and who occupied Çankaya, the presidential residence, mattered for the Turkish state and political elites. If the AK Party emerges as a convincing winner from the local elections, Prime Minister Erdoğan may feel emboldened to run for the presidency.

If not, the party may open the way for him to remain as Prime Minister by repealing the self-imposed three-term rule. Either way, the local election results will determine the party's leadership cadres for the years ahead.

In a highly polarized election atmosphere, parties tend to focus on particular issues and appear caught up in short-term political fights. The resolution of the Kurdish issue, drafting of a truly civilian constitution, and further democratization of the political system as a whole remain the most significant institutional and structural issues for Turkey. Regardless of what happens in the upcoming elections cycle, parties competing to run the country will have to come up with a comprehensive agenda and a viable strategy to resolve these issues.

Turkey's election year with three upcoming races is in full force. Local elections on March 30th and the presidential elections scheduled for August 14th will determine the course of Turkish politics in the years ahead. At such a critical turning point for Turkey, this study is meant to provide a short overview of the standing of the political parties and an analysis of three major issues (Kurdish peace process, Gezi Park events, and the AK Party-Gülen rift) that will be determining factors for the outcome of the elections. While no big surprises are expected from the local elections, the perception of success or failure of the ruling party will have an impact on its calculations with respect to the presidential election and the parliamentary election in 2015.

In a highly polarized election atmosphere, parties tend to focus on particular issues and appear caught up in short-term political fights. The resolution of the Kurdish issue, drafting of a truly civilian constitution, and further democratization of the political system as a whole remain the most significant institutional and structural issues for Turkey. Regardless of what happens in the upcoming elections cycle, parties competing to run the country will have to come up with a comprehensive agenda and a viable strategy to resolve these issues.



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