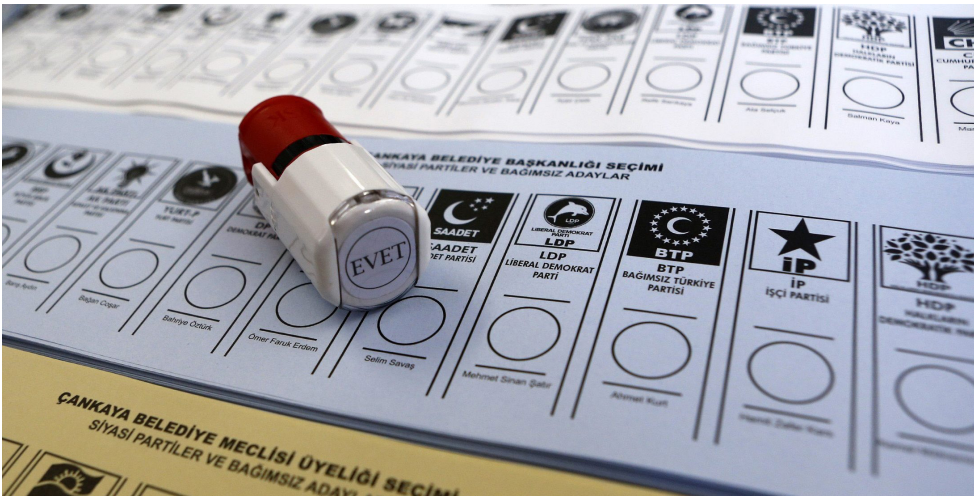


IMPLICATIONS OF TURKEY'S LOCAL ELECTIONS



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Turkey's local elections on March 30th resulted in a convincing AK Party victory compared to the last local elections in 2009. The CHP also improved its share of the vote compared to 2009 due to its decision to run non-traditional candidates in Ankara and Istanbul. However, the CHP failed to show itself as competitive against the AK Party at the national level, receiving less than 30% of the vote. The election results indicate that the Turkish electorate did not change its voting behavior based on recent political crises, such as the Gezi protests and the graft probe. While the ruling party was able to promise economic growth and the delivery of services at the local level, the opposition parties failed to convince voters that they presented a viable alternative.

Local election campaigns were run like national elections and the main issues that dominated the campaigning process were not local issues. The AK Party focused on the services it has delivered as the ruling party. It charged pro-Gülen judicial and bureaucratic interventions in the political process as illegitimate attempts to engineer politics. The opposition parties tried to capitalize on the corruption allegations and perceived failures of Turkish democracy under the AK Party government. The election results show that the opposition cannot rely solely on

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the shortcomings of the ruling party, but needs to come up with a comprehensive political platform to be competitive. Further, they also show that political polarization was effective in mobilizing the masses, as a record number of voters went to the polls.

Election Results

The March 30th elections witnessed an unprecedented voter turnout (approaching 90%) for a local election. Unofficial results show that the ruling AK Party exceeded 45%, reflecting a 6-point increase from the 2009 local elections. The CHP's share of the vote showed some improvement from the 2009 local elections but remained below 30%, a psychological threshold that would have shown the opposition party as competitive. The MHP made no significant gains except for victories in a few large cities, such as Mersin and Adana. The MHP and the CHP competed for votes from similar secularist and nationalist constituencies in the coastal regions. Even when they supported each other's candidates, their success was limited and their votes insufficient to create a coalition block against the AK Party. The BDP held onto its traditional Kurdish vote with some inroads into the broader liberal constituency in the West. As expected, in the Kurdish majority cities there were no serious contenders other than the BDP and the AK Party, with the CHP and the MHP consistently falling below 3-5%.

Out of the 81 mayoral races, the AK Party won in 49 cities, the CHP won in 13 cities, the BDP won in 11 cities, and the MHP won in 8 cities. Out of the 30 major metropolitan cities, where 70% of Turkey's population lives, the AK Party won in 18 mayorships, while the CHP won 6, the MHP won 3, and the BDP won 3. The CHP's goal was to win in two out of three major metropolitan cities – Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. However, the CHP retained Izmir but lost in Istanbul and Ankara. The race in Ankara was the closest, as the CHP candidate, Mansur Yavaş, came very close to defeating AK Party incumbent Melih Gökçek. This was an important test for the CHP's strategy to run center-right and far-right candidates who could appeal to the conservative nationalist and Gulenist bases. In terms of increasing the CHP's votes, this strategy seems to have paid off to some extent. Winning Ankara would have given the CHP a psychological boost and further legitimized the party's new strategy.

While there were a few surprises, almost all of them were due to local circumstances and individual candidates. For instance, the incumbent mayor in Hatay, Lütfü Savaş, was elected by the AK Party in 2009, but switched parties and ran for the CHP in 2014 following the AK Party's decision to run the former Justice Minister Sadullah Ergin. The Hatay win was the result of the CHP's strategy to run with a relatively popular and center-right candidate. In Antalya, which is a liberal and coastal city, the AK Party candidate was able to defeat the incumbent CHP mayor. This way, the ruling party showed that it could make inroads in coastal constituencies. The AK Party was surprisingly successful in cities that were traditional strongholds of the left, such as Ordu and Artvin. These surprises indicate that both the AK Party's and the CHP's votes are not static and the right candidate and strategy could be effective even in a party's traditional stronghold in local elections.

Presidential Elections

The AK Party's comfortable win gives Prime Minister Erdoğan enough of a mandate to stand for presidency in August 2014. Should he decide to run, who is going to take the party to the general elections in early 2015 remains open to speculation. It is also unclear if Erdoğan would actually point to a potential successor publicly in the event that he becomes president. At that point, the party would have to hold a national convention and candidates could compete for leadership of the party. There is also a chance that Erdoğan does not run for presidency. In that case, the AK Party would likely change the three-term limitation and allow Erdoğan to continue as Prime Minister. However, in the aftermath of such a strong showing in the local elections, this scenario is less likely than before March 30th.

If Erdoğan decides to run for presidency, as the AK Party's candidate, the current President Gül may well be positioned to lead the party to general elections as Prime Minister. Gül has shown no indication to run against Erdoğan, as this could lead to serious fissures within the AK Party. The local election results indicate that the AK Party's presidential candidate has a very strong chance of winning the presidency. It remains an open question if the opposition can come up with a candidate who can appeal to the center-right voters. If Erdoğan decides to run, the opposition candidate will have to be very popular. At the moment, there appears to be no one that stands out. While the AK Party

will try to win the presidency in the first round of elections regardless of who its candidate will be, the opposition will likely try to keep the AK Party candidate under 50% in the first round and unite around a candidate in the second round.

The Opposition

The main opposition party, the CHP, has been struggling to find its voice within the Turkish political landscape, drastically transformed in the 2000s. Displaced from being the “party of the state,” the party has represented the old Kemalist elites for a long time. Recently, the push for a new CHP has grown and the old guard within the party has lost some ground against a more center-left current, pushing for an increasingly open CHP to different segments of the Turkish society. Facing the AK Party that has dominated the main constituency in Turkey, i.e. the center right, the CHP has struggled to reach out to broader segments of the society. The local election results indicate that despite some of the “cosmetic” and tactical changes in certain localities (running with far-right and center-right candidates), the CHP is still struggling to convince voters it is a viable alternative.

The main agenda item the CHP discussed during the campaign season was the corruption allegations and Erdoğan’s alleged increasing authoritarianism. The AK Party’s platform charged, in return, that the alliance between the CHP and the Gulenist networks within the state was an attempt to design the political process through illegal means rather than the ballot box. The CHP’s message was rejected by a strong majority of the electorate. Failing to make significant gains, except in localities where it ran with more center-right and far-right candidates, the CHP was not competitive against the AK Party at the national level. It remains a party of the western and southern coastal regions that are traditionally the bastions of the secularist vote.

The CHP’s strategy for the rest of the election cycle in 2014 and beyond may gravitate toward incorporating more center-right political figures into the party. While this may bring tactical gains, it risks frictions and even fractures within the party because its secularist and Kemalist core may resist attempts to broaden its base. In that case, we may witness internal struggles, including a renewed push

for leadership change. The party leadership may be able to navigate through this election defeat unchallenged due to the urgency of putting up a serious fight against an AK Party presidential candidate. Still, reaching out to broader segments of the society will remain CHP’s long-term challenge.

Foreign Policy

During the campaign season, the most significant foreign policy issue that seemed relevant was the Syrian conflict. However, parties withheld from openly discussing how to address the conflict and the Syrian refugee issue. The polemic was raised when the CHP blamed the government for trying to drag Turkey into a conflict with Syria to inflame nationalist feelings and increase its votes in the elections. The Turkish military’s downing of a Syrian plane for violating the Turkish airspace a couple of days ahead of the elections became politicized. The leak of the recording of a top secret meeting at the Foreign Ministry on plans to protect a small Turkish territory, Süleyman Şah Tomb, inside Syria was a major national security breach. The opposition tried to underline the content of the recordings to argue that the government wanted to drag Turkey into a conflict with Syria. Election results show that this argument was unsuccessful and it may have actually created a further electoral backlash against the networks that leaked such information. This type of politicization of national security matters in domestic policy is surely unhealthy for Turkish foreign policy and clearly the electorate does not respond positively to such revelations.

As the election cycle continues with the upcoming presidential elections in August, Turkey is unlikely to take a major step in any direction in its foreign policy. There are signs that Turkey will restore relations with Israel in the near term, as an agreement over the Mavi Marmara incidents is finalized. Normalization of relations will likely mean the admittance of Turkish aid into Gaza and broader discussions about the gas fields in the Mediterranean. This may also lead to some movement on the resolution of the Cyprus issue. As a heavily energy dependent country, Turkey aims to diversify its own sources and become a major energy hub. In the context of the Ukrainian crisis, Europe will likely spend more time diversifying its energy sources through Turkey. These considerations may yield to opening of more

chapters in the EU-Turkey negotiations in the long run. In the short run, it is more reasonable to expect the development of a conversation about Mediterranean natural gas fields.

With respect to Syria, notwithstanding a major shift on the ground, it remains unlikely that Turkey will take a major initiative in an election year. We can expect Turkey to focus on containing the risks and security threats emanating from Syria while addressing the refugee crisis. Turkey hosts close to 900,000 refugees and around 220,000 of them are housed in refugee camps. Social and economic integration as well as education of the Syrian refugees remain the biggest challenges for Turkey, in addition to the associated economic costs. The refugee crisis is projected to continue throughout the region and refugee pressure on Turkey will continue to increase. Turkey is likely to align itself with the international community to address the Syrian crisis and push for a political solution. However, as the conflict metastasizes, there may not be much room for a political settlement any time soon, barring a major shift in the balance of power between the Assad regime and the opposition.

In the wake of the Ukrainian crisis, Turkey aligned itself with NATO allies and refused to recognize Russia's *fait accompli*

in Crimea. The West seems to be acquiescing to de facto dismemberment of Crimea, on the condition that Russia does not go further into Ukraine. Turkey will probably avoid endangering its broader energy and trade relations with Russia while acting in concert with western allies. If the West goes for a bolder approach against Russia, which seems unlikely at this point, Turkey may remain within the more conservative camp.

While there is no obvious reason to expect a major foreign policy move by Turkey in the short term, the presidential elections may bring foreign policy debates to the fore since the presidency holds more of a representative function of the Turkish state. The presidential candidates will have to outline their election platforms since this will be the first time a Turkish president is elected by popular vote. Given that the Kurdish vote will be critical in the presidential elections, the peace process will have to move at a more rapid pace. As a result, the resolution of the Kurdish issue, democratization, adoption of EU standards, and reenergizing Turkey's EU membership may take the center stage during the presidential election campaign.

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