

Erdogan's legacy for Turkey in his final term

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London

Turkey's 17th general election was never an election about who would win; it was a foregone conclusion that the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) would do that and that Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in his final term as the prime minister, would be given not only the mandate to govern but also the moral authority to forge Turkey's future in the next four years and, arguably, beyond.

But actual votes mattered too. Would AKP's majority be so large that it could change the constitution unilaterally? Or, failing that, big enough to put constitutional proposals to a referendum without horse-trading with other parties represented in the parliament?

As things turned out, the AK Party won slightly less than 50 percent of the vote, but fewer seats than in the last parliament and not enough to change the constitution without cooperation from other parliamentarians. The main opposition CHP won 24 more seats than it did in 2007, reflecting some new political relevance under Kemal Kilicdaroglu. But this was a modest advance, which may not be enough to prevent further unrest in the party.

The MHP squeaked into parliament, with 13 percent of the vote and 56 seats, 15 fewer than in 2007 but enough to ensure that strong nationalism will be represented in parliament and not just on the street -- not necessarily a bad thing. Most importantly, the Kurdish BDP gained ground from the AK Party on independent tickets in the south east, returning 36 deputies with very diverse political identities, including two in Istanbul. This was a clear reflection of regional disillusion with the last government's failure to make good on its promise of a "Kurdish opening".

Now that the election fever is over, what matters is the quality and urgency of the solutions which Mr. Erdogan brings to the issues to be tackled, and how far he and the other political leaders, all well dug in to their political trenches, are prepared to work together to find solutions. Mr. Erdogan's support has been built on his success in creating a booming economy and in ending decades of chaotic coalitions, military coups and failed international financial bailouts.

Foreign investors have traditionally seen the AK Party as the most market-friendly party. But they have also increasingly come to recognise that all is not well with the Turkish polity and that future Turkish success will depend on finding solutions to the

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major problems which now confront Turkish politics, society and, yes, even the economy.

Among many foreigners, there is a bit of over-simplification about the AK Party government, namely that it has an agenda to “islamise” the country. It is, of course, true that a majority of Turks are devout and conservative. Their stake in the country’s governance, since 2001 represented by the AK Party, has steadily become more influential, to the dismay of the old secularist establishment. The AK Party both reflects their devout and conservative attitudes, and exploits these to ensure its political dominance. But that doesn’t mean the return of the sharia.

What does matter, however, is that the Turkish political process is one in which the government has appeared increasingly intolerant of opposition and criticism, and focussed on narrow political advantage. Opponents point to rampant use of wiretaps by state agencies, the government’s handling of the Ergenekon case and other scandals involving the “deep state”, the detention of large numbers of journalists critical of the government, and nepotism. The news on 14 June about the arrest by Turkish police of 32 members of the “Anonymous” collective seems to be connected with the government’s intention to introduce a filter system for access to the internet for all Turks in August.

Besides, the AK Party, like previous Turkish governments, has become steadily more clientilist in its conduct of government. Its supporters assume positions of influence. Companies run by AK Party sympathisers get big government contracts. The stakes involved in this have become much higher than in the past because of the great success of the Turkish economy. This has reinforced the serious polarisation of Turkish society.

Mr. Erdogan’s critics point to his authoritarian streak. They fear he will use his growing power to switch to a more presidential system of government, with an eye on becoming president himself in the years ahead.

Balcony diplomacy

At his traditional “balcony speech”, Mr. Erdogan asked explicitly for forgiveness from all political rivals and individuals he might inadvertently have hurt during his campaign. He ordered his party to “adopt a posture of humility and servility”. He promised to open a new, clean page..

As a top priority, he promised to rewrite a civilian constitution in consultation with opposition parties. EU-oriented reforms over the past decade have already changed about one third of the 1982 Constitution, drawn up under military rule. The AK Party has promised a whole new text. For it to stick, it must be the product of a genuine consensus, including the Kurdish national movement, not a top-down imposition.

Mr. Erdogan also assured his audience that that the mega-projects he unveiled during the campaign would commence immediately. The election campaign had witnessed promises of new cities, high-speed trains domestically and reaching as far as Mecca and Xian, suspension bridges, airports, tax holidays, a “crazy” grand canal parallel to the Bosphorus waterway, and iPads for all.

One can justifiably be sceptical about Mr. Erdogan's balcony promises, which, he may abandon within a few weeks if he remains true to his form in 2002 and 2007. Based on those precedents, a period of confrontation lies ahead, and consensus appears difficult in the short term. The issue of a new constitution is likely to polarise the political arena, as the opposition remains fearful of AK Party attempts to engineer permanent control over the system.

Mr. Erdogan says the new charter will be based on democratic and pluralistic principles that will bring Turkey closer to EU standards. Besides, as we've said, the AK Party is short of the so-called "referendum majority." Whilst this does not imply that the government is about to delay constitutional reform, it necessitates dialogue with CHP and MHP as well as independent members of Parliament. This seems to be exactly what the Turkish electorate had in mind.

So, this time, in his final term, we hope that a combination of the new parliamentary numbers, and recognition of what they mean in terms of popular attitudes, together with a desire to leave an enduringly positive legacy as Prime Minister, will lead Mr. Erdogan to compromise on the scale of his presidential ambition and to address in tolerant fashion the questions which divide Turks so bitterly, and which increasingly lead outside observers, like us, to fear for Turkey's future successful development.

Accommodation with Kurds

The situation in the South East is one reason why a new constitution cannot be delayed. Abdullah Ocalan, the jailed leader of militant Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), has threatened a "big war" if the government failed to begin serious talks days soon after the election. The electoral gains made by Kurdish independents were a message to Erdogan to engage more fully, after his failure to follow through on his initiative to grant Kurds more rights two years ago.

However, Mr. Erdogan may not want to be seen to be bowing to pressure from Ocalan. This means that Turkey is likely to experience unrelenting waves of civil disobedience or even large scale PKK attacks unless Mr. Erdogan initiates the process of drafting the new constitution. This promises a very hot summer for Turkey, and the new government should find ways of calming the tension by serious engagement, rather than paying lip service.

Is it too much to hope that the BDP, or at least some members of it, might be prepared to signal that they would support constitutional change in parliament, subject to satisfaction that a new constitution, which met their aspirations, as well as those of the great majority of Turks, would emerge from the drafting process?

Economy comes first

Having built a reputation for ending Turkey's financial meltdowns of the past and making it one of the world's fastest growing emerging markets, the government needs to make sure that this success continues. Youth unemployment is high in a country where the average age is 28. High GDP growth has been driven largely by domestic demand, and inflation is starting to grow. The big current account deficit

requires careful macro-management of an economy, which is now over-heating.

Unlike the financial storms threatening the Eurozone and China, the Turkish economic correction can pass swiftly if appropriate measures are enacted without delay. Specifically, the Central Bank needs to adopt a more orthodox strategy by raising interest rates, and the government to pitch in with fiscal tightening. The question is whether Mr. Erdogan, with the election won, will feel able to undertake the level of economic belt-tightening, which the situation now demands.

Then, what about external challenges, inextricably linked to the domestic agenda, that the new government will likely face? Ahmet Davutoglu seems likely to be re-appointed as Foreign Minister. Will he continue to pursue his far-reaching strategies, not just regionally, but also globally-sometimes indeed reaching beyond Turkey's effective grip? Will Turkey's increasing confidence and economic strength lead it to set its own rules and play according to these, rather than the rules set in Washington or European capitals?

Arab Spring; normalised relations with Israel and Armenia

The upheavals in the Arab world have certainly set back Turkey's hopes of rapid progress to a more stable, prosperous neighbourhood. The most pressing crisis is now thousands of refugees fleeing to Turkey to escape a bloody crackdown by President Bashar al-Assad. Having embraced Assad as a friend and urged him to make reforms, Mr. Erdogan is now confronted with a Syrian government, which uses merciless force against its own people. The prospects for the Syrian people, and the implications for Turkey, seem grave indeed.

But it does not follow that Ankara's "zero problems with its neighbours" policy was mistaken. Turkey's new relationships with her Arab neighbours were established with governments, which have now lost power and credibility, and Turkey's difficulties in re-setting its relations, for example with the opposition in Libya, are plain. But Turkey is no different from Western governments in this respect; and Turkey's new relationships with people in Arab countries go deeper than the government level.

We believe that Turkey is capable of managing the transition and of resuming its regional role with the successor administrations there. A bigger challenge for Turkey in the Middle East is to resist inclusion in the dangerous trend for major regional powers, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, to assume the role of patrons of Arab Sunni or Shiite states, with the consequential risk of destabilisation and confrontation in the region.

Ankara should stick to its "zero problem" approach: a better-governed, more interdependent region with more efficient borders, integrated infrastructure, visa-free travel and free trade is in its interests and those of its western friends. This applies not just to the Arab countries. Turkey should seek opportunities to normalize relations with Israel (through a mutually satisfactory arrangement, rather than inconclusive blame game that goes on) and Armenia, recognising that its international leverage is most effective when it has productive ties with all parties in the region. Recent talks between Baku and Yerevan have generated hope that Ankara may no longer be held hostage to their protracted confrontation.

Reluctance or re-engagement with the EU?

The EU's internal divisions and some European politicians' hostility to Turks joining the club have done much to harm the EU's appeal among Turks. Support for EU membership is declining and many people question why a dynamic Turkey would want to enter a union plagued by debt and slow growth, and get into a strait jacket while it can pursue its own regional ambitions. The obstructions by France, Germany and Austria are viewed by some politicians as a blessing which has allowed Turkey to develop its own geo-economic space and assert its national pride and identity.

No wonder that the issue of the EU was totally absent from Mr. Erdogan's campaign speeches. It only appears on the 151st sheet of his 160 pages long election programme, where "unfair and unfounded opposition" of certain EU countries is strongly condemned. EU accession process is now hanging by a thread, since there are almost no negotiating chapters left to open.

The loss of momentum in the development of the EU-Turkey relationship is concerning. There is no doubt that the EU's soft power was responsible for major reform in Turkey. That has now been lost. The Europeans have turned inward, absorbed by the economic crisis facing the Euro zone. And many Turks make simplistic comparisons between the Turkish and European growth rates and conclude that Turkey will be better off on its own.

Both are mistaken. Turkish economic and political development will best be secured by revitalisation of the accession process. And Europe too will be strengthened and renewed by what Turkey has to offer in terms of political and security reach, regional stability, demography and diversity.

The new government must actively find a way to get lifeblood back into the relationship. It is already committed to create a new Ministry of European Union Affairs. But we should not expect Ankara to tango on its own. Both sides should recognise that both Turkey and Europe are changing and also that the global economic and political tectonic plates are shifting, not necessarily to the advantage of the EU. New approaches are needed to overcome deep-seated problems and to put the future EU-Turkey partnership on a healthier basis.

On Cyprus, mutual absence of trust between Ankara and Nicosia is the single biggest obstacle to reunification of the island, and it seems unlikely that the EU will be able to broker a breakthrough, given the unwillingness of other member states to confront Cypriot intransigence. There's no need to tell the Turkish government that this situation is a major reason for the paralysis in Turkey's accession negotiations. Ankara cannot be expected to make unilateral concessions.

Given the lack of communication between Turkey and the Greek Cypriots, one possibility that has recently been suggested by the International Crisis Group is an international conference to initiate a process that includes the four main (albeit asymmetrical) parties to the history of the Cyprus dispute, Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots, Turkey and Greece. This could be led by the UN, and include

representation from the EU. It should focus on addressing difficult issues such as security, implementation and guarantees.

Greater consensus and tolerance needed

We are cautiously optimistic about what the election results portend for Turkey. It is true that, even if the number of AK Party seats has been slightly trimmed, its political dominance remains overwhelming. So the challenge for Prime Minister Erdogan, which lies in reaching out to all Turks instead of burnishing a relationship of mutual advantage with his followers, is, after a third electoral victory, perhaps more difficult than ever.

However, the result failed to give the AK Party the number of seats necessary to decide Turkey's constitutional future without consulting others. It demonstrated that the problems of the South East cannot be solved without policies which go to the heart of Kurdish concerns and which involve the BDP. It showed that the CHP cannot be written off. All these outcomes should lead the AKP leadership to reflect.

We hope that the government will seek greater consensus and reach out to a wider group of stakeholders for a more inclusive approach to the solution of Turkey's problems than it demonstrated during its second term. The outstanding question now is whether the AK Party will perpetuate the pattern of advancing its own preferences at the expense of others in Turkey's deeply divided polity or instead adopt the path of consensus-seeking. The opposition parties will also have to decide that they have an important part to play in bridging the divisions in Turkish society and play the political game more constructively.

And we hope that Western Europeans will not leave the field to the toxic co-conspiracy of European and Turkish opponents of Turkey's democratic, European future but remember that they too have an important stake in the full development of Turkish democracy and stability, and that they share a common destiny with Turkey within the EU.