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Turkey: Local Elections Gave Huge Victory to Erdogan

Bayram Balci

OP-ED

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SUMMARY The recent elections mark a new start and a new departure for the Turkish prime minister's political career. Erdogan has proved that he is still popular, but despite this popularity and this victory, he has a lot of work ahead.

Almost 90 percent of the 53 million Turkish voters went to the polls Sunday 30th March for municipal elections. More critical than all previous local elections, the voting process has been globally open and smooth despite some minor irregularities denounced by the opposition. Although local, these elections took on a more national dimension. Highly criticized in recent months because of his autocratic tendencies, as well as huge corruption scandals affecting his closest ministers and even family members, these elections became a referendum, even a plebiscite for the Turkish Prime Minister. He had declared during the campaign that if his party did not get a clear victory, he would abandon politics. After last weekend's election, he has good reasons to be pleased.

The results gave his party an undeniable victory which can be measured by the fact that Ankara and Istanbul remain under AKP control. But more impressive is the number of votes his party got at the national level. Around 45 percent of Turkish citizens voted for his party, a result which is higher than the 39 percent that the AKP had received in the 2009 local elections. This victory is more significant when we look at the results of the main opposition parties. The Kemalist and secular CHP, Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, (Republican Party of the People), got only 28 percent and, in third position, the nationalist MHP, Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Party for Nationalist Action), got just 18 percent. The pro-Kurdish party of BDP, Baris ve Demokrasi Partisi (Party for Peace and Democracy), got a small percentage of votes at the national level, but increased its vote in the Kurdish provinces where it controls more municipalities than before.

Besides this clear victory for the AKP and Erdogan, these elections bring us to three main conclusions. First of all, this victory is a kind of revenge for him against his opponents who have used his authoritarian policies and corruption scandals to attack him. There is now almost no doubt that this triumph will pave the way for him to be elected president next August. If he succeeds, he could become the political leader who has left the greatest mark on modern Turkey, more than its

founder Kemal Ataturk.

Secondly, it seems that Erdogan's authoritarian policies and his harsh response to the popular unrest did not prevent him from winning this election. Banning Twitter and YouTube to prevent the public from learning about a leaked conversation in which Turkish officials discuss creating a false-flag attack as a pretext for war on Syria, as well as intimidation of the media are some of the authoritarian measures that apparently voters did not punish. Moreover, the corruption scandals that had tarnished him and dozens of people from his entourage did not appear to be an obstacle for this victory. Apparently, Turkish voters preferred a strong and capable leader, although authoritarian and corrupt, to other leaders that they consider unable to confront many challenges that Turkey faces. This situation brings to remind the Italian example where the scandals of corruption did not prevent Berlusconi from winning elections and staying in power.

The third lesson from this election, and perhaps the most important and valuable for the Prime Minister, is the defeat inflicted on the Gülen movement which has been the main architect of the anti-Erdogan campaign. Once allies, the AKP and the Gülen movement, a religious movement with various interests in the field of education, business, media, both in Turkey and around the world, have seen their relations sour and resulted in mutually nasty attacks before the elections.

Gülen movement followers who have been infiltrated in the justice and police structure have made accusations against Erdogan of corruption and meddling in the media. Although the Gülen movement has never acknowledged these infiltrations, its media have been the main propagators of these allegations. Moreover, the Gülenist media in the structure of the state have been mobilized in order to defeat the AKP in Istanbul and Ankara, the most important cities in Turkey. The elections results show that they did not succeed at all. To a large extent, their strategy was even counterproductive.

Erdogan struck back at them, affecting the movement of being a conspiracy used by Turkey's enemies "who are envious of her economic success". The latest leaked wiretaps, revealing to the public the content of a top secret security meeting in the Turkish ministry of foreign affairs about Syria, was certainly counterproductive. This leak has shown the Gulenists attempt to use whatever they could to discredit their rival and to weaken him. It seems that this created disgust and even a kind of fear among the population who preferred supporting the Prime Minister even if Turks are against any kind of military intervention in Syria. In his speech from the balcony of the AKP after the victory, Erdogan promised to eradicate this movement. He said "we will enter in their lair. They will pay for this. From tomorrow there may be some who flee". This is a clear indication that the war between the AKP and the Gülen movement is not over. Although Erdogan has undoubtedly won a key battle against this movement, after having purged its members from the state and promising to close its schools, this does not mean that he won the war. Moreover this does not mean that Gülenists don't have other resources to continue fighting him. They are still there, and they have still their very dynamic networking activities capable to hurt him both in Turkey and abroad.

Since the beginning of the Turkish Republic, there has been a serious Kurdish problem in Turkey that has never been resolved by any government. Since 1984, inability to find a political solution to the Kurdish problem has resulted in considerable violence that ended last year thanks to negotiations engaged by Erdogan with the leader of the PKK. The well-organized Kurdish opposition showed solidarity with Erdogan during this worst period when he face huge unrest in June 2013 and more recently when he was accused of corruption abandoned by his previous liberal supporters. To a large extent, he owes his victory to the Kurdish opposition who stayed out of the battle between him and his opponents and kept alive the peace truce although Erdogan did not fulfill all his promises for Kurds rights. Kurds will rightly expect think that it is time for Erdogan to keep his promises and to grant them what they have been waiting for decades, their political and cultural rights. Less than six months before the presidential elections in which he will run, Erdogan will be at a delicate position; giving more rights to Kurds will alienate some of his supporters, while not

satisfying these legitimate expectations will be dangerous for him and for peace in the country.

Another hard challenge for him will be to reassure Turkey's allies and investors to continue to invest in Turkey. Because of the climate of challenge that has been installed in the country before the elections, some investors have started to have a doubt about the stability of Turkish market. The AKP victory could have been interpreted as a clear sign for a more stable country. In fact it is not. In his victory speech, the Turkish prime minister has employed a very vindictive style, far from the consensual and embracing discourses that usually investors expect (seek.) His discourse was not inclusive enough to prevent street fight between protestors and the police that have scared the international community. Before the elections another point of concern for Turkey's allies was Erdogan's conception of majoritarian democracy. In his speech the Turkish Prime minister gave the feeling he is not ready at all to adopt a more liberal and inclusive understanding of democracy. At contrary he gave serious signs about his intention to continue the same arrogance and the same populism.

All things considered, these elections mark a new start and a new departure for the Turkish Prime minister in his political career. Erdogan has proved that he is still popular, but despite this popularity and this victory his image is still tarnished and he has a lot of work to do if he wants to be the next President who will be elected for the first time in Turkish history by popular vote and not by a parliament completely devoted to a political leader.

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