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*SHORT COMMENTS*

*Reconsidering Turkey’s Elections: Why Has not the Spring Come yet?*

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## **Reconsidering Turkey's Elections: Why Has not the Spring Come Yet?**

**By Birgul Demirtas, Professor of International Relations, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Turkish – German University of Istanbul**

Because of its geographical location, demographic size and historical background, Turkey's elections have an impact beyond its borders. Election results and the ensuing domestic dynamics within the country have a potential to affect the neighboring areas because of kin groups and Turkish diaspora, especially in European countries. In that respect, two rounds of elections in May have attracted great interest worldwide.

This paper analyses the results of Turkey's two-round elections taking place on May 14<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>. It sheds light on how and why Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) have come out as winners once again after 21 years in office despite all the serious domestic troubles.

First of all, at the onset it must be stated that the election results for Erdogan and the AKP must be evaluated separately. We can begin by analyzing the results of the presidential elections. For the first time since 2014 Erdogan did get less than 50% in the first round and could not win the presidency<sup>1</sup>. He could win only in the second round. For the first time there was a second round of voting in presidential elections after the new election system was enacted in 2014. In the second round Erdogan got 52.18% of the votes while his rival Kemal Kılıçdaroglu did get 47.82% support. This is an indication of the fact that changes in Turkish political dynamics force Erdogan more to get the minimum necessary support.

Second, with regard to election results for the AKP, the coin has two sides. On one hand, it has become the first party, getting more votes than all the other parties. In that sense, it can be considered as the “*winner*.” But, on the other hand, there is a 7% decrease in its support compared to the previous voting in 2018. It is the worst victory for the AKP since 2002

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<sup>1</sup> Before 2014 the President was elected by the Parliament. AKP changed the relevant law and since then the President has been elected by popular vote. This legal change has been accompanied by system change in 2018 in which parliamentary system was replaced by sui generis presidential system.

elections in which it got 34.42% of the votes. Therefore, it can be considered as a relative loser and only a relative winner.

Comparing the results for Erdogan and his party AKP, it is possible to state that the AKP has started losing its support in the Turkish electorate. There has been a remarkable decline in its support in the last elections. However, Erdogan has proven that he still has the features of a charismatic leadership. Therefore, the AKP has become a political party dominated by the leadership. It has lost its massive electoral base and got only one third support of the Turkish electorate. In brief, the majority of Turkish voters do not vote for the AKP anymore, but a slim majority still supports Erdogan's leadership.

To many both inside and outside the country, the results of Turkish elections were unexpected as the opinion polls indicated a possible change in the attitude of Turkish voters. According to many opinion polls, Kemal Kılıçdaroglu, the leader of the united opposition (Nation Alliance – *Millet İttifakı*), had been leading during the election campaign. The slogan of the opposition was "*We promise you. Springs will come*" inspired by a popular Turkish song. But the results of the election were different from what the opinion polls had predicted. And the spring has not arrived in the country yet.

How and why did Erdogan win the elections? How did the AKP become the first winner despite the economic crisis and earthquake disaster? The earthquake on February 6<sup>th</sup> which affected 11 cities and led to the death of more than 50.000 people according to the official figures has uncovered the fragility of the Turkish political system. The weakening of meritocracy, ideology-based appointments to bureaucracy, and the blurring of the line between the governing party and state have had its consequences in the earthquake region. Especially Kahramanmaraş, Hatay and Adıyaman were heavily affected by the earthquake, leading to a cataclysmic destruction in the city centers and even the collapse of hospitals and many public buildings. How could it be possible that the buildings were constructed in seismic region were not more resilient to earthquakes? It is also a fact that approximately 51% of buildings in these cities were constructed since 2001<sup>2</sup>. The AKP period is notorious for unplanned construction

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.paraanaliz.com/2023/genel/tuik-yikilan-binalarin-yuzde-51i-2001den-sonra-yapildi-g-47133/>

in cities. The warm relationship between the Government and some of the construction firms is also well known.

In addition, the post-earthquake period has witnessed the failure of the AKP policies since the rescue teams could not be sent to many places in the first two days. Many people had to die under the rubbles just because of the fact that there was no state official to extend them a helping hand.

Moreover, the country has been going through one of the most serious economic crises in Turkish history. The value of Turkish lira has fallen by more than 20% in 2023<sup>3</sup>. The housing market in big cities is not affordable for many Turkish citizens anymore because of the immense increase in prices of houses either for rent or for sell.

How did Erdogan win the elections once again despite all the domestic problems and governance crisis? There are four basic reasons: a) populist politics and polarization in Turkish society, b) emotional ties between Erdogan and his electorate, c) construction of technological successes, d) the AKP's discourse of "*Turkish century*."

First of all, Erdogan and his team continued to implement populist politics during the elections. "*We*" versus "*others*" rhetoric has been used to further polarize the society. The united opposition was accused of allying with the terrorist organization since the pro-Kurdish Green and Left Party has supported Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the candidate of the opposition. In that sense, securitization was part of the election campaign of Erdogan. The policy of accusing all opposition groups with being terrorists or cooperating with terrorists has been a fundamental characteristic of the AKP politics. This policy has further increased after the declaration of support by the Green and Left Party. After Kilicdaroglu visited the Green and Left Party during the election campaign, Erdogan stated the following on a TV program: "*Isn't it clear who Mr Kemal, the head of the main opposition, is visiting right now who he is visiting, he is visiting the extensions of terrorism in the Parliament. I wonder what the head of the main opposition who visits the extensions of terrorism, terrorists in the Parliament, will*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://tr.euronews.com/2023/06/07/turk-lirasi-gun-icerisinde-dolar-karsisinde-yuzde-7-deger-kaybetti>

*get from this?<sup>4</sup>* This is just one example of Erdogan’s discourse associating the pro-Kurdish party with terrorism and the cooperation between the main opposition party and the Green and Left Party as an illegitimate political relationship.

Moreover, during the election campaign the then Minister of Justice, Bekir Bozdog stated that *“On the evening of May 14<sup>th</sup>, one of two photographs would appear in Turkey. Either there will be those who celebrate with champagne or there will be those who put their foreheads in prostration for gratitude and praise the God<sup>5</sup>.”* This statement has become a symbol of how the AKP tries to add fuel to the fire with regard to existing polarization in society between secular and conservative groups.

Second reason was Erdogan’s personal appeal for the Turkish electorate. The fact that he still has the support of 52% of the Turkish electorate is an important indication of his popularity. His charisma has an impact on the Turkish electorate. The huge celebrations on the night of May 28<sup>th</sup>, second round of elections, all around Turkey lasting even after the midnight is a proof of how emotional ties should be considered in evaluating his victory.

Third important reason was the construction of the AKP’s policies as technological successes. Turkish drones, fast train line, bridges, TCG Anadolu warship, and first Turkish electrical automobile (TOGG) were used as successes of Erdogan’s regime. All of these were used in advertisements on billboards. TOGG and TCG Anadolu Warship were also displayed for people during the campaign period. In other words, AKP wanted to emphasize concrete developments in Turkey. The elections results suggest that this tactic has successfully worked.

Fourth reason was related to Erdogan’s success in creating new conceptualizations for Turkish electorate with regard to Turkey’s place in global politics. Erdogan’s rule has become successful in creating a new narrative for the country. Since the one minute crisis at Davos summit in 2009, The AKP constructed an image of the country as if the country could withstand the global powers and play an important role in international relations. The AKP’s election slogan of *“Turkish century”* with the photos of Turkish warship, electrical automobile

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-hdpye-verilecek-her-taviz-pkkya-verilmistir-756906.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/siyaset/akpli-bekir-bozdog-toplumu-ikiye-boldu-ya-sampanya-patlatip-kutlayanlar-ya-da-alnini-sukur-icin-secdeye-koyup-2075637>

and new bridges refer to how Turkey could have an impact on global politics. Whether Turkey could play a big role in global politics under the current circumstances is another question, but it is clear that more than half of Turkish electorate believe in this narrative.

In sum, Erdogan's success in the elections can be considered as a result of his polarizing attitude and populist politics, emotional bond with the AKP supporters, construction the AKP's policies and conceptualizing of new narratives based on Turkish power. It can also be concluded that Turkey's domestic politics would have an impact far beyond its borders because of historical and geopolitical dynamics.



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