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## MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN TURKEY – ERDOGAN’S POPULARITY UNABATED

*Marius Calligaris*

In the Turkish municipal elections on 30 March 2014 the AKP gained a clear victory. Mass protests in the summer of 2013 and a leaked corruption scandal had not been able to tarnish Erdogan’s popularity. In broad strata of the population he stands for economic upturn, and the electorate obviously did not want to see any experiments in uncertain times. There is, however, reason to fear that the Prime Minister will continue with his authoritarian style of administration, deviate even further from the previous reform course and that the polarisation in the country will continue.

In the municipal elections in Turkey on 30 March 2014 the ruling party obtained a clear victory, with the voter turnout being almost 90 percent. In so doing, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) won 45.5 percent of the votes (as compared to 38.8 percent in the 2009 municipal elections) and managed to defend the Mayor’s seat in Istanbul and (barely) in Ankara. The opposition party CHP (Republican People’s Party) gained 27.8 percent (23.1 percent in 2009), while the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) obtained 15.2 percent (14.7 percent in 2009).

The election result had been eagerly awaited. In spite of the internal stability, which is remarkable for Turkish standards and has been reigning since the AKP’s taking up of office, there had been ten months preceding the polls, during which two dramatic events had shaken the political landscape: the

months of ongoing mass protests against the government caused by the planned replacement of a park in Istanbul and the subsequent bloody crackdown on protesters as well as the uncovering of an apparently huge corruption scandal.

### **Mass protests against the authoritarian course of Prime Minister Erdogan**

The wave of protest started on 28 May 2013 with a nonviolent demonstration by environmentalists directed against a planned construction project on the site of the Gezi Park in the centre of Istanbul. The situation escalated, when the police started to suppress the demonstrations. Various groups, among them mainly juvenile members of the secular middle class, but also from Alevist and Kurdish circles, intellectuals, artists, leftist militants

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and trade unionists joined the protesters. The excessively harsh crackdown by the security forces bonded this heterogeneous group. The demonstrations also spread to other Turkish cities. Eventually, Gezi Park was forcibly cleared by the police on 15 June; however, the protests continued into September, primarily in Istanbul and Ankara, and claimed a total of eight dead.

Gezi Park became a symbol of resistance of the Turkish civil society – not only against excessive police violence, but also against Prime Minister Erdogan’s style of government. As a matter of fact, he has shown increasingly authoritarian traits in recent years. The fact that the AKP has been faced with an inefficient parliamentary opposition since 2002 has probably contributed to this autocratic style. But the resistance was also directed against the Prime Minister’s tendency to interfere with the citizen’s personal way of life. In addition, Erdogan reacted to the Gezi protests by accusing the demonstrators of being rioters, hooligans, plunderers and terrorists, partially directed from abroad, which even increased the people’s anger. It was a relapse into former conspiracy theories typical for the Kemalists, which were thought to have been overcome by the governing time of the AKP. During the Gezi dispute, Erdogan had to face his limits as well as the fact that large sections of the population do not want an authoritarian government.

The events, however, also showed the prime minister’s way of understanding democracy. The latter apparently only relates to holding elections. According to this, an electoral victory grants free reign and entitles the AKP to ignore the concerns of those who did not vote in favour of the Party.

#### **Fetullah Gülen – an “apolitical” antagonist**

The other key event, the corruption scandal described in the following, is linked with the conflict between Erdogan and the preacher

Fetullah Gülen, who lives in Pennsylvania, U.S.A. His movement supports schools and cultural associations, controls media and is closely interlinked economically. Gülen himself declares himself as apolitical. His critics accuse him of infiltrating the state by networks built inside the police and justice apparatus as well as of pursuing a secret Islamic agenda. Gülen was the AKP’s primary ally in limiting the political role of the military and breaking up the Kemalist structures. During the past years, he and Erdogan strongly dissented, the last time because of Gülen’s critique of the harsh course of action against the Gezi Park protests. The breakup became obvious, when the government announced that it would close down the private schools of the Gülen movement, which constitute a considerable source of income and recruitment for the movement. Moreover, critics accuse Erdogan of not tolerating any influential personality beside himself and of aiming at weakening Gülen in Turkey.

#### **Uncovering of a corruption scandal**

On 17 December 2013 the police arrested a number of influential persons linked to the AKP, inter alia the sons of three ministers as well as the managing director of the state’s Halk Bank. The affected persons are accused of fraud, money laundering and bribery in connection with illegal gold deals with Iran as well as tender rigging in the field of construction work.

In a counteraction the government removed or transferred approximately 1,500 public prosecutors and police officers (among them the police chief of Istanbul) from their offices, particularly in the departments in charge of fighting economic crime. This was a clear attempt at impairing investigations. The leading public prosecutor publicly complained of having been prevented from expanding investigations in the corruption scandal. The fathers of the three arrested (and since then released) ministers’ sons

stepped down as a consequence and the cabinet was by and large reshuffled.

Erdogan spoke of a dirty campaign against the government and an “attempted coup”. He accused Fetullah Gülen of orchestrating the action and of allegedly having established “parallel structures” by way of his networks. In fact, the Gülen movement may well have played a decisive role in uncovering the corruption and it seems that the public prosecutors intended to harm Erdogan. His accusation in this respect may well be justified to a certain extent. The strong reactions to the allegations, however, fuel the suspicion that the accusations against the arrested persons might be in part substantial. In addition, the information was made public that upon the order of public prosecutors in Istanbul thousands of people, among them the Prime Minister, members of government and the opposition, businessmen, journalists and many others, were evidently wiretapped. A telephone call, in the course of which Erdogan advised his son to get rid of large cash amounts, was spread on the internet. Erdogan called it a fake. The recordings of further talks, among them attempts at pressurising journalists and influencing ongoing lawsuits, followed. Here, too, the head of government accused Fetullah Gülen of having launched the bugging operation – which numerous observers presume as well.

All in all, both the corruption scandal – which apparently reaches as far as into the Erdogan family – and the bugging affair are evidence of what abuses, probably on a larger scale, have spread in Turkey during the eleven years of sole AKP rule.

### **Sanctions against internet and social media**

Virtually as an answer to the various uncoverings the AKP majority passed a judicial reform, which transfers the control of the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors to the Justice Minister. Critics view this as a

sheer violation of the separation of powers, also reversing the constitutional reform of 2010, with which the independence of the judiciary had been codified. Moreover, a law was adopted, which makes it possible to block internet pages without a prior court order. As a consequence, the social media platforms Twitter and YouTube were blocked. Since the media are mostly controlled by the government, this course of action has probably quite rightly been classified as an attempt to muzzle opponents and critics of the government.

### **The reasons for the Prime Minister’s winning the elections**

The election campaign was completely dominated by the corruption affair, which was also reflected in the media. There was hardly any discussion of factual issues. The confrontation took place on a hard and very low, in part ridiculous, level. Erdogan purposely emphasised polarisation in order to rally the conservative circles. In the light of the critical events of the past years, the elections had effectively turned into a vote on Erdogan, and the head of government purposely presented it as such. His victory or, rather, that of the AKP had been anticipated, however not in such dimension. In large sections of the population, the party stands for the economic upturn and many realised infrastructure projects – and Erdogan had put everything on this card in the election campaign. In times of uncertainty, no experiments were sought. With Erdogan, the average person obviously has the feeling of being in power himself. Evidently, the efforts of resolving the Kurdish conflict were rewarded. In addition, the opposition parties did not succeed in gaining enough trust within the population and offering plausible alternatives. The AKP’s (former) ace, namely its credibility, obviously did not take any damage by the corruption affair. A leading political scientist indicated a certain tolerance in the Turkish population with respect to corruption, as long as there

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are positive achievements involved. The blockage of social media sites did not have a negative impact, and the disclosures were seen as simply made up allegations. The publication of a bugged conversation in a meeting with the head of government regarding a possible military operation in Syria shortly before the elections evidently went too far and was condemned as an attack on national security even by newspapers, which used to be against the AKP.

### **Consequences of the election result and outlook to the future**

It is to be feared that Erdogan, in view of his understanding of democracy as outlined above, will grade his victory as a confirmation of his authoritarian administration and possibly will even reinforce it. After the elections, he announced, in an aggressive and irreconcilable speech, that he would take revenge on his opponents and break up the “parallel structures”. The polarisation in the country will probably continue. It has to be taken into account that the polls expressed the existing rift between the rather secular and the more conservative Muslim parts of society. There is the danger of a further restriction of the freedom of speech and the freedom of media, as well as of the right to demonstrate, thus, moving away further from the former reform course. In 2002, Erdogan presented himself as a reformer and won some praise from the West, which in the end made the start of accession talks with the EU possible. The Prime Minister has now turned back the advances in a number of areas. Many observers think that he is at the point of rendering void the achievements and the progress of his long time in office and of inflicting damage to the international prestige of the country and the Turkish ambitions to join the EU.

The current election outcome has renewed the question about who will be the next Turkish president. There have been

speculations for a long time that Erdogan himself aspires to the office of the head of state. A bad performance in the elections would probably have made him reconsider his candidacy. However, a constitutional reform with the purpose of introducing a presidential system with more competencies for the head of state failed. As a result, Erdogan might possibly have lost his interest in becoming President. Before the elections, there were increasing indications for a planned change of the AKP's status – in the case of a defeat –, which currently sets a limit of maximally three terms of office. A change of this rule would make it possible for Erdogan to run again in the 2015 parliamentary elections and remain Prime Minister (a victory of the AKP is widely expected). Other observers assume that Erdogan, in the event of his candidacy for president, will try to secure the Kurdish voters' support in exchange for concessions on the Kurdish issue. The question remains open whether a polarising head of state would be good for the country.

At any rate, the presidential campaign has already started. In view of the recent AKP victory, the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2015 might be brought forward. Turbulent domestic times are, therefore, to be expected in Turkey.

#### ***Personal Data:***

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