

Erdogan and the reinvention of the Turkish presidency

12 August 2014

Summary

Sunday saw Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan win election to the Turkish presidency. The outcome was expected, the only real question had been whether Erdogan would require a second round to defeat his main opponent Ekmeleddin Ihsanoğlu. The election marks the closing of a remarkable 14 months in which Erdogan has faced liberal protests, corruption allegations, a bitter fallout with his former allies in the Gülenist movement, and a string of regional foreign policy reversals. His election has reaffirmed his status as the dominant force in Turkish politics. Nevertheless, his ambition to transform the presidency into a powerful executive remains a significant and unpredictable gamble.

Sunday's election saw Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan become the first directly elected president in the country's history. The ultimate outcome had not been in doubt, with the main question being whether Erdogan could secure victory in the first round. With 52% of the vote he did so, comfortably beating his opponent Ekmeleddin Ihsanoğlu into second place with 38%.

The pattern of the victory was also largely as expected, although turnout at 74% was far lower than March's local elections, and Erdogan's 52% at the lower end of the polling forecasts. Whilst Ihsanoğlu captured large parts of metropolitan and coastal western Turkey, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) dominance of central and eastern parts of Anatolia delivered Erdogan to the presidential Çankaya palace. Elsewhere, the third candidate and ethnic Kurd Selahattin Demirtaş won almost 10% of

the vote, a considerable achievement in a country which has for decades been effectively at war with large parts of its Kurdish population.

The election marks the closing of a remarkable 14 months for Erdogan in which he has overcome threats to his government and personal authority from widespread civil unrest among young urban liberals, corruption scandals implicating him and his immediate family, a bitter split with former allies in the Gülenist Hizmet movement, and a succession of regional foreign policy reversals. His survival and victory is testament to a weak opposition, but also to the electoral effectiveness of the AKP, the polarised nature of Turkish politics and his achievements in office. But his ambitions to create an executive presidency nevertheless look like a significant political gamble, and suggest uncertainty ahead.

The un-ceremonial presidency?

At first glance, Erdogan's decision to leave the powerful prime minister's office to run for the largely ceremonial presidency looks unusual. The AKP internal charter disallows members from running for a fourth consecutive term in parliament, which in principle made exiting the prime ministership and parliament necessary for Erdogan. However, there seems little doubt that this could have been altered to allow him another term as prime minister if he had wanted it.

But, Erdogan does not intend to be a president in the mould of the incumbent and fellow AKP co-founder Abdullah Gül, or his predecessors, who have overseen a largely ceremonial and apolitical presidency. Erdogan's argument that "a president elected by the people cannot be like the previous ones" and comments from those close to him suggest strongly that he will seek to establish the presidency as both the head of state and the primary seat of executive power, either in law or in custom. Some have pointed to the symbolism of occupying the presidential palace in 2023 - the centenary of the founding of the Turkish Republic - as a driving motivation.

The first step to a seriously enhanced presidency is constitutional reform, which Erdogan is almost certain to pursue. Renewing the constitution introduced by the military in 1982 is a recurrent theme in Turkish politics. A cross-party attempt in 2011 through the Constitutional Reconciliation Commission failed after the four parliamentary parties failed to produce a workable draft, whilst a completed AKP draft in late 2012 lacked political support.

For now however constitutional change looks out of reach. The current constitution requires a two thirds majority to pass constitutional amendments directly through parliament, or three fifths to put proposed changes to a referendum. The AKP remains a long way short of two thirds, but only three seats short of being able to push for a referendum. Whether the party can break this barrier at the parliamentary election in June 2015 will be a critical part of Erdogan's calculus and will largely determine his agenda. In the meantime - and in the longer term if he is unable to alter the constitution - Erdogan will seek to use the current powers to the full. These powers are not insubstantial, although they remain largely untested by Erdogan's predecessors. They include the ability to promulgate laws, convene parliament, block legislation, ratify international treaties, appoint

members of the Constitutional Court, appoint and direct the Chief of the Turkish Military and convene and chair the National Security Council.

Article 104.a	Summon the Grand National Assembly of Turkey
	Promulgate laws
	Send back laws to the Grand National Assembly for reconsideration
	Send laws to the Constitutional Court for annulment on the basis on unconstitutionality
	Call elections for the Grand National Assembly
Article 104.b	Appoint the Prime Minister and accept their resignation
	Appoint and dismiss ministers on the prime minister's suggestion
	To convene and chair cabinet meetings whenever deemed necessary
	To ratify international treaties
	To represent the office of Commander-in-Chief of Turkish armed forces
	To preside over the National Security Council
	To sign decrees
	To appoint the chair and members of the State Supervisory Council, and instruct it to carry out investigations
Article 104.c	To appoint members of the Constitutional Court
	To appoint the Chief Public Prosecutor of the High Court of Appeals

Selected powers of the Turkish president

Source: Turkish Constitution

Aside from his ability to channel and capture public opinion, above all for Erdogan, retaining political influence will mean retaining control of the parliamentary AKP. As Erdogan is constitutionally obliged to give up his party membership to become president, this will in turn largely depend on his successor as party leader and prime minister. As leader of the AKP Erdogan will oversee the appointment of the next party leader before his presidential inauguration on 28 August. Once president, Erdogan then has the power to appoint a prime minister from within the ranks of the national assembly. His choice will be an important signal.

There has for some time been speculation that Erdogan and President Gül would execute a Putin-Medvedev style job swap; this now looks highly unlikely. Although polling suggests that Gül is the preferred candidate among AKP voters to succeed Erdogan, he has explicitly ruled out such a move amid speculation that he is increasingly dissatisfied with the direction in which Erdogan is taking the party. In any case, Erdogan would have been instinctively cautious about seeing the second most popular AKP politician in the prime minister's office.

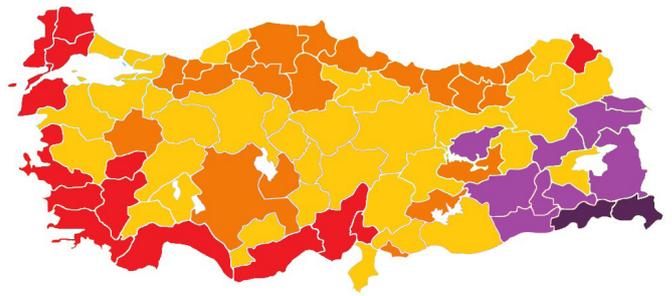
Erdogan's instincts will be for a loyalist who is sufficiently malleable to be his proxy in the parliament and the AKP, but with enough authority to lead the party into a June 2015 election which will determine the fate of Erdogan's constitutional ambitions. Ultimately Erdogan faces the dilemma that any prime minister who delivers a large enough victory to allow constitutional change will by definition have won a mandate to rival his own.

Erdogan has been circumspect in naming a successor, but there are already clues to the candidates. He has said that the successor will be prime minister and lead the party into the June 2015 election. This suggests a parliamentarian who will have only served two parliamentary terms and is thus free to be re-elected in 2015. The most prominent name to have emerged is Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, but others - not all of whom satisfy the above criteria - include Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç who recently made headlines with a call for Turkish women to be more demure in public, and former Transport Minister Binali Yıldırım.

The Erdogan gamble

The electoral victory is a considerable personal triumph for Erdogan, and a relatively decisive reversal of his apparent vulnerability in the wake of Gezi Park in 2013. It provides a degree of certainty in Turkish politics which has been absent for the last year, and has been welcomed by markets. However, Erdogan's push for an executive presidency may in fact begin a new chapter of political uncertainty. Erdogan's strategy is a significant gamble, and a number of constraints are worth bearing in mind.

First, the next twelve months will be a period of substantial change within the AKP. With the party's leader and dominant figure officially having to cut ties, political space within the party will inevitably open up, bringing with it a degree of internal competition that Erdogan's presence suppressed. Over 70 of the AKP's most senior MPs will have to vacate their seats in June 2015, having served three terms since 2002. For Erdogan and his proxies in the Assembly this presents a significant opportunity to build a new generation of loyalists, but could also present a challenge to their control of the party. It should not be forgotten that there are alternative voices in the AKP. High profile figures, including President Gül and the highly regarded Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan have publically criticised government actions, although there are now question marks over the political future of both men, including speculation that Gül might leave the AKP altogether.



- Majority of votes for Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu
- Majority of votes for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
- Over two-thirds of votes for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
- Majority of votes for Selahattin Demirtaş
- Over two-thirds of votes for Selahattin Demirtaş

These results are accurate as of 17:00 BST - 11/08/2014

Turkey regional voting patterns
Source: Cihan News Agency 2014

Second, despite his announcement on Sunday that he “would not be the president of only those who voted for me” Erdogan has in the last year shown little sign of a desire to bridge the widening political divisions in Turkey. If anything, his political strategy has been built on deepening them. The harsh clampdown on protestors in Gezi Park and his aggressive rhetoric, suggest that his instinct continues to be to use social and ideological tension as a motivational tool for his own supporters. The divisions on which Erdogan has built his electoral success remain deeply entrenched in the Turkish political economy and society: religious and secular; conservative and liberal; international and regional; western Marmara and eastern Anatolia.

Whilst such divisions may be electorally expedient, they pose some difficult questions about Turkey's future political cohesion. In the run up to a critical election in June 2015, previous experience suggests that he will once again choose to play up these divisions. This may be bad news for those in the western metropolitan areas, resentful of an increasingly socially conservative policy programme and what they see as a paternalist, even authoritarian style of government. Interestingly, this developing strain of Turkish democratic and religiously-informed social conservatism may be beginning to suggest the kind of political model we might expect for a ‘normalised’ Iran.

Third, with the increasing likelihood of an independent Kurdistan emerging in northern Iraq, the status of Turkey's own Kurds will be high on the agenda. Those who argued that Erdogan's relatively conciliatory approach - including a June bill granting

amnesty to some members of the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) - was merely a ploy to attract Kurdish votes will now see this conclusion tested. Whether Erdogan pushes on with the process or steps back on the Kurdish question will continue to be a delicate issue, particularly given that the Kurds' own constitutional demands may complicate his personal political ambitions and agenda.

Fourth, Erdogan may attempt to use the presidential office to re-launch his damaged foreign policy strategy and ambition to become a leader for Sunni Muslims in the region. Erdogan's strong support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas has however, seriously damaged relations with other regional powers in Egypt and Israel. Turkey's majority Shia neighbours also pose serious challenges for Erdogan - both the deterioration of the security situation Iraq as well as the prospects for Iran's normalisation - and his response will be heavily informed by significant energy interests as well as the Kurdish question in Iraq. They will also be watched very closely by both Europe and the US for whom Turkey remains a strategic partner in the region.

Ultimately, however the greatest risk may prove to be the on-going vulnerability of the Turkish economy. In particular a current account deficit which has benefited from a weaker lira, but refuses to dip below 6-7% due to imports of energy and manufacturing equipment which cannot be supplied by domestic supply chains. This, and a dependence on short term foreign capital flows for financing, make Turkey one of the most vulnerable of the emerging economies to the tapering of US

quantitative easing - as the IMF noted earlier this year. In this context Erdogan's public disdain for Central Bank independence may be a source of anxiety for investors, as will the Bank's decision to lower rates in the run up to the election despite concerns about rising inflation and capital outflows. Politically, faltering of the economic growth upon which the AKP has built much of its success would provide a real stress test of the resilience of support in Turkey for both the AKP and Erdogan personally.

For those watching from outside Turkey, the period until June 2015 election is likely to be defined by tactical manoeuvring. Erdogan's consolidation of power, the use of the presidency as a domestic political platform and likely deepening of social and political divisions will raise concerns about both the style and substance of Turkey's democracy, with negative implications for Turkey's already stalled EU accession. Widespread upheaval across the Middle East will challenge Erdogan's ambition to become a regional leader. For investors and markets, the electoral cycle warns not to expect significant economic reform or fiscal policy change before June 2015. This election may have temporarily settled the biggest question in Turkish politics - can Erdogan win? - but it leaves plenty of questions still to answer.

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