

Shifting the Focus: Consolidating Democracy in Post-Election Turkey

by Yigal Schleifer

SUMMARY

Turkey's recent parliamentary elections resulted in a resounding victory for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which won its third straight election and again managed to increase its share of the national vote.

During its first two terms, the AKP projected the image of an aggrieved outsider while overseeing major economic and political reforms that eviscerated the power of the entrenched elite and secured rights for the downtrodden.

Recently, however, the AKP, and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in particular, have raised alarm by veering away from reforms and adopting a more intolerant attitude, a trend starkly apparent in Erdogan's bristling campaign rhetoric.

The United States has been excessively concerned with Turkey's turn eastward and should instead focus more on domestic developments to ensure that Turkey continues on the path of reform.

This should include encouraging Turkey to resolve the Kurdish issue and to reinvigorate the EU process by taking bold steps on the Cyprus dispute.

Turkey's free and fair parliamentary elections on June 12 were yet another important achievement for a country that over the decades has seen four military coups and various other interventions in its democratic process. The poll was also a historic milestone for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which won its third straight election and which again managed to increase its share of the national vote, this time reaching close to 50 percent.

But the AKP may have little time to celebrate its victory. While the party has broken significant political and economic ground over its nine years in power, the upcoming period might prove to be the most difficult yet. In the coming weeks and months, the AKP will have to address an overheating economy, turmoil in next-door Syria, escalating tension over the Kurdish issue, as well as questions about how it intends to push ahead on its plans to introduce a new constitution and to revive the stalled European Union (EU) membership process. At the same time, the AKP and, in particular, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, are likely to continue facing charges both at home and abroad that Erdogan's leadership style has become increasingly autocratic and that some of the democratic gains made in Turkey—particularly regarding freedom of the press and freedom of expression—are under threat.

How Erdogan and the AKP respond to these issues will have profound implications for the continuing development of Turkey's democracy and will also require close monitoring by the United States. While policymakers and pundits alike have focused almost exclusively on Turkey's possible "drift away from the West," it is the internal drift from the path of domestic reform that should be the major cause for concern. Washington should coordinate closely with Ankara on the international front—particularly regarding events in the Middle East—but it must also keep a close eye on domestic developments in Turkey and be prepared to put Ankara on notice for any backsliding on the democracy front.

FROM AGGRIEVED OUTSIDER TO CONSUMMATE INSIDER

The AKP first came to power in 2002, running on its status as an Islamic-rooted outsider whose leadership had been persecuted by Turkey's secular establishment (Erdogan himself had spent time in jail for "inciting religious hatred" because of a poem he recited publicly while mayor of Istanbul). In

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the 2007 elections, it scored another big victory by running a campaign that doubled as a referendum on the Turkish military’s unsuccessful efforts to prevent one of the AKP’s founders, Abdullah Gul, from becoming president because his wife wears a headscarf.

Over the course of the two terms that it has been in power, the AKP has helped revamp Turkey’s crisis-prone economy, overseeing a period of phenomenal growth. It has also instituted a series of political reforms—many of them part of Turkey’s EU bid—that, among other things, have reduced the military’s role in politics and have afforded Turkey’s minorities increased protections. Two years ago, the AKP also announced its “Kurdish opening”—a series of planned reforms designed to resolve Turkey’s decades-old Kurdish issue. (The initiative appears, for now, to be on the back burner after political missteps and escalating violence.)

In this recent election, the party still made the question of Turkey’s continuing democratization a central pillar of its campaign, promising that once reelected it would work towards passing a new civil-minded constitution that would replace the current one, drafted by the military after the 1980 coup. In doing so, the party sought to perpetuate its image as champion of the downtrodden.

Yet, in many ways, the ascendant party no longer played the role of aggrieved outsider but rather that of the consummate insider. A large part of its campaign was based on promises for large-scale infrastructure projects throughout the country, suggesting that the underdog that came to power by challenging Turkey’s established state order had now turned into that big state itself.

FEARS OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

This evolution, though, has been accompanied by increasing questions and concerns—both inside and outside of Turkey—about the commitment of the AKP and, in particular, of Erdogan to democratic principles, especially in their quest to consolidate power. The arrest in March of two prominent investigative journalists, accused of being part of an ultranationalist plot to topple the government, led to renewed charges that the government is using its power to punish its critics. Members of Turkey’s secularist press also complain that fear of government retribution has led their publications to self-censor and avoid openly criticizing Erdogan and the AKP. In addition, an opaque government plan to require every Turkish internet user to subscribe to a filtering program has raised new concerns about the AKP’s commitment to protecting freedom of expression.

During this past election, meanwhile, Erdogan’s speeches frequently employed blistering language designed to attract Turkey’s nationalist voters, while alienating many Kurds, who had voted in large numbers for the AKP in the 2007 parliamentary elections. And in reaction to sharply critical editorials in *The Economist* and other international media that highlighted Erdogan’s growing intolerance for dissent and his imperious

style of governance, the prime minister and other AKP leaders lashed out, accusing the publications of being under the influence of Israel and “anti-democratic” groups.

Even the AKP’s promise to push for a new constitution after the elections was not without its own question marks. Despite the party’s pledges to draft an updated constitution that would help institute an “advanced democracy” in Turkey, one of the main features of the AKP’s new constitution was expected to be the introduction of a French-style presidential system. This change appears to be designed so that Erdogan can maintain power even after he steps down as party leader at the end of this parliamentary session. Indeed, although victory in the polls was almost certain, the AKP still ran an aggressive campaign, seemingly intent on winning the 330 seats necessary to submit a new constitution to a national referendum. (The party ultimately received 326 seats.)

As a result, some observers, including many who had supported the AKP in the past, could not help but ask during the election whether the illiberal and populist streak that had always been present in Erdogan would now come to define the prime minister’s third term.

SHIFTING WESTERN FOCUS BACK TO THE DOMESTIC FRONT

This sort of question stands in marked contrast to what had previously been the worry about Erdogan, which was that the prime minister and his party—due to their Islamic background—were moving Turkey away from its traditional Western orientation and allowing the country to “drift East,” particularly through its growing outreach to Arab and Muslim countries. In Washington and other Western capitals, concern over Turkey was resolutely on the foreign policy front. Much was written about “who lost Turkey,” how it was lost, and how to bring it back into the Western orbit. Such fears were at their height last year after the Mavi Marmara Gaza flotilla incident and Turkey’s rejection of UN sanctions on Iran.

But as recent events in the Middle East have shown, while Ankara might march to its own drummer, it still mostly follows the same path as its traditional allies. In Libya, after initially rejecting the idea of a NATO intervention, Turkey signed on to the mission there. With Syria, although it refrained from publicly criticizing the Assad regime at first, Ankara is now ratcheting up the pressure on Damascus and has given its support to a British and French-backed UN Security Council resolution condemning the Assad regime.

Washington should certainly coordinate closely with Ankara in the foreign policy realm in order to ensure that their priorities and concerns, while not always identical, are, at the very least, not conflicting. But, based on developments inside Turkey, it would also make sense to pay close attention to the country’s domestic front and be on the lookout for any democratic backsliding. Should that happen, policymakers should be ready to point out these lapses to Ankara, as well as to assist Turkey’s political players and the country’s civil society groups to get the democratization process back on track.

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ***Pay closer attention to Turkey’s domestic scene and be prepared to put Ankara on notice for any democratic backsliding.*** A closer focus on Turkey’s domestic developments regarding democratization issues and a willingness to confront Ankara about any negative developments on that front will send a strong signal that Turkey’s continuing democratization is a priority for Washington. Turkish officials may be suspicious that Washington would use concerns over democracy as a pretext to criticize the country’s assertive foreign policy. In order to avoid such accusations, the U.S. should be consistent in holding all of its allies to the same democratic standards.
- ***Encourage Ankara to re-start a comprehensive process for resolving the Kurdish issue.*** In 2009, the AKP took unprecedented steps in pushing for reforms that would have granted the Kurds more political and cultural rights. However, the initiative quickly ground to a halt when Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) militants received a hero’s welcome from local Kurds upon their return to Turkey—outraging the Turkish majority. Yet no matter how daunting the challenge may be, ending the Kurdish conflict will be crucial for Turkey’s future stability and prosperity. The majority of Kurds, whose hopes were raised and then dashed by the “Democratic Opening,” voted for the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) in the recent elections because they want a nonviolent political solution to this issue. Therefore, the AKP should work together with the BDP to first and foremost write a constitution that redefines Turkish citizenship in non-ethnic terms and recognizes the Kurdish language. Then it should take steps to address other issues like decentralization of government and allowing Kurdish cities to readopt their original names. Although the measures needed to resolve this issue are clear, it will be easy to recoil when faced with the political costs, so international support will be crucial.
- ***Remind Ankara of the importance of the EU process and engage with Brussels and the Europeans to help get the process moving again.*** At a time when the U.S. and Europe are coordinating closely to assist the democratic transitions in Egypt and Tunisia, they should also be discussing the future of Turkey. EU negotiations remain critical for Turkey’s continuing democratization and reform process. And like the Kurdish conflict, the measures needed to restart EU negotiations are clear. The current impasse is the result of broken promises on both sides: Turkey will not open its ports and airports to Greek Cypriot traffic and the EU will not allow direct, preferential trade to Turkish Cypriots. Washington has a vested interest in resolving the Cyprus dispute because this issue continues to prevent NATO-EU cooperation. So it should assist Turkey in taking bold steps to move beyond the current standstill. Although both the EU and Turkey appear to be fatigued—interestingly, EU accession was barely a factor in the debates leading up to the elections—a concerted American push could be helpful in getting the process going again.

- *Engage with Turkey’s opposition parties and the country’s civil society groups in order to assist them in developing productive policies and positions.* One of the main challenges facing Turkish democracy has been the lack of a serious political opposition. This past election saw both the main opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the BDP, make some progress, but the opposition still needs help in order to become more effective and constructive—something that would ultimately benefit all of Turkey.

CONCLUSION

The June 12 elections demonstrated once again that the ruling AKP continues to be Turkey’s dominant political force. Yet, the election also failed to give the AKP the ability to determine Turkey’s political future on its own terms, which will perhaps force Erdogan to shed his autocratic proclivities and seek consensus from other groups. With looming economic problems, an unresolved Kurdish issue, and the drafting of a new constitution on the horizon, Turkey is at a critical juncture. How the AKP, and its leader, Erdogan, respond to these challenges will have a profound impact on the continuing process of democratic reform in Turkey. Washington would do well to minimize hysteria over Turkey’s independent foreign policy, and instead focus on ensuring that the country remains a beacon of inspiration for its neighbors.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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