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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# Does Erdogan's Victory Herald the Start of a New Era for Turkey?

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Aug 2014

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## Introduction

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's recent victory in the presidential elections on August 10 came as no surprise. In becoming the twelfth president of the Turkish republic since its declaration in 1923, preceded by eleven years as prime minister, Erdogan is now the most influential figure in Turkish political life since Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Given his ambitions to carry out wide-reaching political changes, some of which will touch upon the very heart of the Turkish political system, this momentous win for Erdogan indicates the beginning of a new era for the Turkish republic.

## Erdogan's Victory and its Implications

Erdogan's victory came as a blow to the Turkish opposition's ambitions, whose only candidate, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, was the former secretary general of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), one of the largest intergovernmental organizations after the UN. Yet, no amount of hard work or support mobilized by the opposition, who had hoped to at least force Erdogan through a second round, could stop the Turkish prime minister from taking the highest office of state for the next five years. Erdogan's victory represents a culmination of a series of successive electoral victories totaling nine parliamentary and municipal elections and popular referendums on constitutional amendments held since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in November 2002. The most recent of these was the AKP's landslide victory in the highly contested and divisive local elections held last March.

This is the first time Turkey holds direct presidential elections. The Turkish constitution previously stipulated that the president of the republic be chosen by a majority of votes in the Turkish parliament. In 2007, however, the parliament failed to elect a new president to succeed ex-president Ahmet Necdet Sezer, after opposition parties boycotted no less than four consecutive sessions of parliament preventing the election of the AKP candidate at the time, Abdullah Gül. This political impasse led to constitutional reforms to prevent a reoccurrence of a presidential vacuum. A referendum on amendments enabling the election of the president by direct popular vote was held on October 21, 2007. These revisions now allow the Turkish president to stand twice and that set the term in office at five years, rather than a single seven-year term.

Turkey's first ever presidential race had an impressive 74 percent turnout from an electorate of 53 million eligible voters out of a total population of 77 million. According to the official results, Erdogan received nearly 52 percent of the vote; with opposition candidate Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu taking around 38.5 percent; and Kurdish candidate Selahattin Demirtaş coming third with some 9.5 percent of the vote.

In the run up to the elections, on June 16, the main Turkish opposition parties, the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), unexpectedly decided to jointly support İhsanoğlu as a presidential candidate to take on Erdogan – a surprising step given their ideological differences. The choice of İhsanoğlu, with his Islamic background, came as a shock to the secular constituency of the CHP, not only going against the values of the party but also demonstrating their clear lack of eligible leaders for presidential candidacy. Thus, Turkey's recent presidential elections were not only the first to be based on direct popular vote, but also the first elections featuring no candidate from Turkey's traditional secular circles. The presidential race was fought between two candidates with Islamic political roots. This is not, however, political Islam in its conservative conception. Both Erdogan and İhsanoğlu are proponents of a secular democratic state, and are committed to respecting its principles and constitution. Setting yet another political milestone, on the other hand, was the third candidate Selahattin Demirtaş, the first Kurdish politician with links to the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) to stand for president, only a month after Parliament was presented with an Erdogan - backed six-article bill on the Kurdish peace process.

In the end, the electoral tactics of the opposition do not appear to have worked. The Democratic Party (DP), Democratic Left Party (DSP), and Independent Turkey Party (BTP) all joined the CHP and MHP in supporting İhsanoğlu. Their hope was to divide the votes of the AKP's conservative base and garner the votes of those who did not support Erdogan, the likes of partisans of Fethullah Gulen's *Hizmet* movement and supporters of the Felicity Party (SP) along with smaller Islamic parties and groups devoid of parliamentary representation. The strategy however backfired. Alawite voters, who make up a high proportion of CHP voters, did not respond to the signals of the opposition candidate; those on the left do not appear to have been persuaded to vote for a right-winger; and the Kurds, who for the first time had a presidential candidate to represent them, would not vote for the candidate of an MHP that rejects the policy of reconciliation with the Kurds adopted by the AKP government.

In addition, contrary to the popular narrative, Erdogan's popularity was not nearly as affected by his government's recent crisis which included a string of corruption allegations, popular protests and the damning criticism and accusations of authoritarianism from the right-wing and left-wing media alike. Neither did the purges of state institutions such as the judiciary and the police, initiated by Erdogan in the belief that there was a shadow state created and run by the *Hizmet* movement, detract from his popularity.

Ultimately, Erdogan's win, along with the absence of a candidate of a different political stripe, indicates the profound political and social transformation occurring within Turkish society in the past decade. Turkey's left is in decline, while popular sentiment leans further to the right (center and conservative), a trend confirmed by all the recent local, parliamentary, and presidential elections, and by the decision of a center-left party like the CHP to nominate a candidate from the center-right. Observers predict splits within the CHP following its failure to attract voters and the defeat of its candidate in the first round of the elections, a candidate who was not even from within its own ranks. At this point, one would not be surprised to see the introduction of ideological changes matching the changes in popular sentiment and leading to the emergence of two opposition trends: a hard right current and an Alawite current.

## Risk of Political Deadlock

According to the current constitution, Turkey's political system is parliamentary. The government, which has executive authority, is drawn from the majority in the elected parliament, while presidential powers are limited and defined. Although, by virtue of the 2007 constitutional amendments, the president's powers include the appointment of the prime minister and the acceptance of his resignation, the system has not become a presidential one. However, as long as the largest political bloc remains the AKP, Erdogan is not expected to face any major challenges to his authority, in that the prime minister, irrespective of who he or she is, will be from the same party and more than likely unable or unwilling to defy the president's wishes.

Problems will arise, however, should the opposition win any future parliamentary elections. Were that to happen, Erdogan would be unable to carry out his policies, even if he activates some of the powers available to him such as the right to chair the cabinet and the national security-council. In such a scenario, the Turkish political

system may well become deadlocked not unlike the French system, where the president and the prime minister are from different political parties.

Being aware of such risk, in his manifesto issued on July 12, Erdogan was clear he would not accept being an honorary president, noting that the election was decided by the people and not by the parliament. Erdogan indicated that he would work to create a new constitution that changes the system of government and redistributes powers between the president and the government. It is certain that his victory in the first round will give him the moral authority to put his presidential vision into effect. Nevertheless, changing the constitution will not be easy. It requires the agreement of two-thirds of MPs, something unlikely to happen given the current political map. Assuming the AKP wins in the next parliamentary elections, it will try to introduce a constitutional amendment that modifies the roles of the president and the government, or even rewrite the whole constitution. If such an amendment is not made, the Turkish political system will continue to conceal the seeds of a hidden or open crisis involving the struggle over governmental and presidential powers; a crisis that is a direct result of the 2007 constitutional amendment providing for direct presidential elections without changing the titular nature of the presidency.

## Aspirations and Challenges

The Justice and Development Party will hold its party congress on August 27 to select the new prime minister, who will also be the new party head, and to decide whether Erdogan's successor will be an interim one (until the next parliamentary elections set for next year) or permanent. Irrespective of this, the new prime minister will have to coordinate with Erdogan in leading the country until the next elections, which may provide enough opportunities to reach a constitutional agreement over the rebalancing of powers to prevent there being two heads of state.

The AKP, with its moderate Islamic leanings, has succeeded in offering a new development model and in consolidating the foundations of Turkish democracy. Erdogan's personal contribution has been significant, his leadership and charisma undeniable, but he has nonetheless manifested clear authoritarian tendencies, ones he considers pivotal to his party's achievements. This may be true, but the test of democracy, and party political life in general, lies in the ability to avert the blurring of the lines between the role of a leader and that of an autocrat.



Erdogan has made no secret of his ambitions to lead the Turkish republic when it celebrates its 100th anniversary in 2023, by which time he will have achieved his vision to transform Turkey into the most important regional player, and, as he once promised, turn it from the world's 17th economy to the 10th biggest. Many challenges await him until then. Erdogan still has to put his party's house in order, prepare for the coming general elections, the results of which will determine his ability to amend the constitution and his chances of realizing his ambition of presidency with absolute powers. He also needs to work in uprooting the remnants of the deep state, find a political solution to the Kurdish issue, and resist the pressures pushing him to skirt the balance between his role as defender of democracy, freedom and human dignity and Turkey's economic and political interests. This is particularly important given that Turkey faces grave challenges in its own backyard, reflected in the crises raging in Syria, Iraq, and the Levant as a whole, that threaten its disintegration and the spill of extremist groups within Turkey's own borders.