



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

## ASSESSMENT REPORT

# The Turkish Political Map in the Run-Up to Local Elections

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | March 2014

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## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The Gulen-Erdogan Dispute and Effects on Local Elections	1
Competition between Parties in the Major Cities	3
Likely results	4

## Introduction

The upcoming local elections in Turkey are the most significant in decades, with the intensifying contest between the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the opposition parties making this set of elections critical. Turkey's opposition parties, in particular, are mobilizing all their efforts to take advantage of the AKP's troubles to end its monopoly of power, which has lasted for three electoral cycles.

Turkey's Supreme Electoral Council has announced 25 political parties eligible to compete in the forthcoming local elections scheduled for March 30; these parties are dominated by "the big four" represented in the current parliament—the ruling majority, liberal Islamist AKP, with 320 seats out of a total of 550; the Republican People's Party (CHP) in the Kemalist-nationalist mold with 134 seats; the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) with a right-wing nationalist stance and 52 seats; and the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), supportive of Kurdish rights, with 26 seats.

In contrast to general elections in Turkey, local elections give space for smaller parties and independents to compete. By law, political parties must obtain at least 10 percent of the vote to enter parliament. Votes for parties that fail to achieve this threshold are distributed proportionately among those that have. This tends to restrict the make-up of the Turkish parliament to two to four parties.

## The Gulen–Erdogan Dispute and Effects on Local Elections

A new factor affecting these elections is the entry of the Hizmet movement, headed by the influential religious figure Fethullah Gulen, as an informal electoral group against the ruling party. While this movement might not be on the stated party lists taking part in the election, it can influence them given its substantial social, educational, and media presence. The Gulen movement lent its support to the AKP in all past elections, prior to their current dispute. In the course of the forthcoming elections, it will become clear how much this dispute affects the AKP's ability to win as it has in the last three occasions.

Founded around 50 years ago, the Hizmet movement is one of the most important religious groups in Turkey. Although it started with social objectives, the nature of its goals and activities gradually changed, placing it at the heart of the political action, even

if indirectly. Its greatest impact is concentrated in its educational centers, with more than 500 schools in some 92 towns. The group also owns a vast media network comprising television channels, newspapers, radio stations, and websites, as well as welfare organizations and thousands of tutorial colleges and student accommodations that have gained the movement considerable popular sympathy and support. Additionally, the movement had wide-scale presence and influence in the judiciary and the police, which it tried to use to pressure the Erdogan government into implementing certain policies. The government, however, quickly took steps to limit the dominance of the movement by purging its supporters. In response, the movement has worked to bring down the government and build new coalitions with secular and opposition trends.

Signals from the AKP indicate that it is not worried by an escalation in hostility with the Hizmet movement in the run-up to the local elections, and is calling upon it to operate within the Turkish political arena on a constitutional basis. Similarly, the AKP is calling upon the movement's youth to ask their leader, Fethullah Gulen, to return from the US to carry out his social and political activity from within Turkey, thereby ensuring the movement is independent and free from outside influences.

The ruling party is also trying to prevent the formation of a coalition of interests between the religious Hizmet movement and the secular opposition parties, which would affect the results of the coming elections. This comes in light of predictions that the movement may strike an electoral agreement with the CHP. Worry about this possibility prompted senior figures in the AKP to issue a warning notice to the partisans of the Hizmet, asking them to ignore any invitation to vote for secular parties, even if this came from the leader of the movement. They were also warned against allowing the secular parties to use Hizmet's media outlets to distort the AKP's image or incite against the government shortly before the elections. In response, in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, Gulen denied the possibility that his movement would support the CHP in the coming elections: "[W]e have never formed an alliance or partnership with a political party or candidate. Our support or criticism has always been around values. Such an alliance will not be made in the future either."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Fethullah Gulen's interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, "The Wall Street Journal Realtime Turkiye," (in English), January 21, 2014, <http://realtime.wsj.com/turkey/2014/01/21/fethullah-gulens-interview-with-the-wall-street-journal-in-english/>.

The CHP's adoption of values opposed to Islamic approaches, in terms of state and society, makes an open alliance a difficult matter for the Gulen movement, even if the objective were to achieve specific political aims, such as bringing down the AKP government. The intellectual and historical groundings of the CHP make it impossible in practice for Hizmet youth and members to vote for it. According to the latest opinion polls carried out by three major pollsters, the AKP will hold on to first place in the local elections, with a slight reduction in overall share compared to the last elections.

## Competition between Parties in the Major Cities

As election day approaches, the strongest opposition party, the CHP, is trying to take advantage of the AKP's troubles and its dispute with the Gulen movement to break its 12-year run of electoral success. The CHP aspires to take the positions for mayor in Istanbul and Ankara, whose joint population represents more than one quarter of Turkey's total population of 76 million. To achieve this aim, the CHP has brought the head of the Şişli municipality of Istanbul, Mustafa Sarigül, back into its ranks as its candidate for mayor of Istanbul, after having expelled him for trying to control the party. For mayor of the capital Ankara, the CHP put forth Mansur Yavaş, who was an MHP candidate at the last elections. Through these candidates, the CHP is trying to acquire votes from the right in Istanbul and Ankara. The AKP is planning to win in the Izmir metropolitan municipality, which is viewed as a CHP stronghold. The AKP's candidate for mayor of Izmir is former minister of transport and communications, Binali Yildirim, who served in the most successive cabinets.

The three main parties are competing for a number of provinces, such as Adana, Mersin, Antalya, and Hatay, where their chances are more or less equal. Competition is most intense between the AKP and the BDP in southeast Anatolia, where the AKP is trying to wrestle Diyarbakir from the BDP, which will exert its utmost effort to gain the municipalities of Şanlıurfa and Mardin, currently held by the AKP. The MHP is aiming to maintain its electoral successes as an alternative option for right-wing voters alongside the AKP. At the same time, the ruling party aspires to make gains in provinces under MHP control, such as Balıkesir, Manisa, and Isparta.

Each party has its own strategy in the competition against the AKP, which is seeking to maintain its current share of the vote, trying to keep it above 45 percent. It is also competing in municipalities not under its control to take them from its rivals. The CHP

will concentrate on winning in Istanbul, Ankara, and other big cities, taking the stance that the importance of this goes beyond the overall results it achieves in the elections; should it make gains, it will represent a serious blow to the morale of the ruling party in the run-up to presidential and parliamentary elections. The MHP, for its part, will seek to maintain its presence as a major political force in Turkey and, if it is able, assume a more effective position between the AKP and the CHP without competing in the large municipalities. The BDP will work to take advantage of the increase in the number of large municipalities to 30, relying on identity politics and the popularity it enjoys in districts with a high Kurdish population, to take three or four large municipalities.

## Likely results

Undoubtedly, the corruption claims raised about ministers in the AKP government, which led to a major cabinet reshuffle in December 2013,<sup>2</sup> have had an effect on the Turkish electorate. In general, a large proportion of voters are inclined to recognize the existence of corruption in state institutions, but at the same time believe there is a conspiracy against the government. Nevertheless, however much voters criticize their parties, they will remain loyal with their votes unless they believe in the principles of another party. When it comes to supporters of the Gulen movement, one estimate predicts that the overall effect will not exceed 3 percent of the vote, although there are no accurate statistics on the size of its membership. If Hizmet supporters vote against it, the ruling AKP party may lose these votes, though this will not mean a drastic change in the results since 3 percent will not close the gap with the other parties. The absence of a strong challenge to the AKP will most likely mean that it will win a large proportion of the votes, particularly in Kurdish areas because of the many development programs the government has implemented in these regions, the democratic reform packages which have benefited the Kurds in particular, and the “peace process,” which has stopped the bloodshed in the predominantly Kurdish southeast.

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<sup>2</sup> See: Policy Analysis Unit, “How will the Conflict between Erdogan and Gulen Affect the Turkish Political Scene?,” *ACRPS*, January 20, 2014, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/29be7529-2676-4e8c-b5e4-131f8271b1e0>.