



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

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Turkey: Local Elections with Regional and International Implications

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | April 2014

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The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

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Introduction

Though the Justice and Development Party (AKP) was anticipated to win the Turkish local elections, the opposition banked on the AKP losing Istanbul, making their victory in Istanbul a shock to many. The AKP's overall share of the vote was also a surprise considering the recent corruption allegations against some government ministers, the opposition's extensive efforts to defeat the ruling party, and the recent standoff between Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his former ally, Fethullah Gulen. This time around, it turns out the AKP fared far better than in previous elections when the political climate had been more favorable.

A Comfortable Victory for the AKP

A few hours after the polls closed and results were declared, it was evident that the AKP was heading for its best local election performance since entering Turkey's political scene. The AKP won 46 percent of the vote—the highest turnout in the history of the country with more than 80 percent. Its main rival, the Republican People's Party (CHP), received 28 percent of the vote; the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) came third with 15 percent; and the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) fourth with six percent.

Compared with its previous performance in 2009, when it took 38 percent of the vote, the AKP improved its best record by eight percentage points in the 2014 elections. Erdogan's party obtained a high proportion of the vote in Kurdish areas, and, for the first time, took the municipality of Muş, situated in the heart of the Kurdish region. It further succeeded in mounting strong competition in the coastal cities, which have long been considered a stronghold of Turkey's secular and nationalist parties. In doing so, it took the municipality of Manisa and regained Antalya, which it lost in the last elections to the CHP. Most importantly, the AKP held on to Greater Istanbul and the capital Ankara, Turkey's two largest cities, even though its chief political opponent rallied stiff competition to win at least one of them. Despite predictions that Erzurum, Fethullah Gulen's birthplace, would fall to the CHP candidate, the AKP won. This is significant because Gulen's movement directed its supporters to vote for the AKP candidate's main rival, irrespective of political affiliation. The CHP, a secular Kemalist party, also adopted a conciliatory rhetoric with the Gulen movement, which it had previously branded

reactionary after its infiltration of the state and its institutions. They did so in an attempt to win over the Hizmet supporters once they had radically broken with their former ally. This, it transpires, came to no avail as the AKP comfortably won 49 out of the 81 municipal districts, compared to 47 in the 2009 elections, including half of the country's 30 major urban centers. The CHP took 13 districts and the MHP and BDP took eight each.

The Importance of the Local Elections and the Significance of the AKP Victory

Rarely do local elections in any country become a regional and international affair, with political ramifications that could affect the whole region. Turkey's local elections attracted unparalleled media and political interest, on which public opinion in and outside of Turkey was equally split. This interest, division, and polarization derive from Turkey's regional weight, its prominent role in most issues in the Middle East, and the election's transformation into a vote of confidence for the prime minister, particularly after he pledged to retire from politics if his party did badly in the local elections.

Since the AKP came to power in November 2002, and especially since Erdogan became prime minister in March 2003, Turkey has aimed for the regional role that was long absent after Ataturk's famous slogan in 1923: "Peace at home, peace in the world." In the period from 2002 to 2010, Turkey's renewed activism in the Middle East pivoted around Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's "zero problems" policy. This enabled Turkey to concentrate on expanding its economic influence and act as a mediator between the region's disputing parties, as it did for negotiations over Iran's nuclear program and the peace negotiations between Syria and Israel. Among other things, it also helped bring about the Doha Agreement that ended Lebanon's presidential vacuum in 2008. However, the Arab Spring revolutions that broke out at the beginning of 2011 forced Ankara to give up this role and side with the popular uprisings gripping the Arab world. Turkey was one of the first states to call for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to stand down, and then strongly backed the Syrian popular revolution, embracing the political and military opposition and opening its doors to refugees. Turkey's regional role increased with the growing polarization between revolutionary and counterrevolutionary forces throughout the region following the ousting of President Mohammed Morsi in July 2013.

In parallel with Turkey's growing importance, Prime Minister Erdogan became the subject of controversy inside Turkey and abroad, viewed by some as a model for political leaders, particularly as he improved his country's economy—currently ranked 17 in the world, and viewed by others as an authoritarian who is concealing a strict religious project behind democratic slogans and a liberal economic vision. Erdogan has certainly provided evidence of personal political ambition and some populist tendencies, but he remains the leader of a party that runs a state with democratic institutions, and makes progress in the state's economic and administrative modernization, despite the party's religious roots. Herein lies the interesting, controversial paradox of this model.

Erdogan has come under intense media criticism for both his position in support of the Arab Spring revolutions, and his transformation into a symbol of the synthesis between Islam and national and democratic identity, wherein an Islamic party can accommodate secularism in a state, and provide a tangible alternative model to all other systems of government found in the region. For the opposition, the local elections served as an opportunity to attack him, with plentiful ammunition afforded by the corruption allegations directed at some party officials and the setbacks to his foreign policy. The opposition has also turned Syria into material for electoral competition by playing off of the stumbling of the Syrian Revolution and the costs Turkey is enduring because of the Syrian refugee influx.

The local elections would not have enjoyed such great Arab and international interest if they had come in another context. For those opposed to Erdogan and his policies, these circumstances created an opportunity to end his ambitions to continue ruling Turkey in the presidential elections in August 2014, particularly after the constitutional and legal amendments expanding presidential powers. The most recent elections, thus, were turned into a battle over the future of Erdogan, his party, and Turkey's regional and international policies. The Turkish voters, however, were provoked by what seemed an underhanded plot to defeat the ruling party and its leader. They decided to turn the tables and give the government that had given stability and economic prosperity to Turkey a victory unprecedented in any local elections. The results also represent popular approval for the policy meant to end the Gulen movement's expansive influence within state institutions, the police and judiciary in particular.

Arab Division over the Impact of the Turkish Local Elections

Given their importance and the considerable stakes involved for Turkey and the region, the local elections received plenty of coverage in the Arab media, reflecting the level of division, especially among the elite, between those supportive of and sympathetic toward the AKP government and those opposed to it. There was also a clear split between sections of the Arab elites, who expressed non-democratic attitudes, and large sections of the Arab public, who displayed sympathy for Erdogan's fight against a broad coalition of Turkish, regional, and international forces desperate to bring down his government. In their coverage, some Arab satellite channels went as far as directly mobilizing against the AKP, describing Erdogan as "a dictator," "the fist of the Muslim Brotherhood," "the arm of a global conspiracy," and "the US and Zionist agent". Their coverage was divorced from reality, demonstrated in their wishful thinking put forth before the elections and their forecasting an electoral defeat for Erdogan and his party even though most opinion polls predicted his victory.

In contrast, following the announcement of unofficial results, social media, particularly Twitter, which exploded with the hashtag "Erdogan Won," engaged millions of Arabs and rose fundamental Arab issues, such as the Syrian revolution, positions on the military coup in Egypt, and the Palestinian cause. Social media displayed unprecedented sympathy from swathes of Arab public opinion for the AKP, and crystallized the extent of the divide between the Arab citizen and elites.

Whatever the case, the results of the local Turkish elections represent a major political victory for the AKP, its allies in the region, and the partisans of democracy. By the same token, they represent a major setback for opponents who wanted to prevent the possibility of Erdogan and the AKP's continued governance and a foreign policy generally supportive of the peoples of the region and their right to choose governments to achieve freedom and human dignity for them. Still, the battle is not over yet, and August's presidential elections are on the horizon. In preparation, both sides are expected to mobilize as they did for the local elections, thus keeping Turkey, with its weight and importance, at the heart of a region-wide struggle.