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Election Analysis

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The Presidential Election in Turkey: History and Future Expectations

Ahmet Erdi Öztürk*

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Introduction

On 20. January 2012, the Parliament of the Republic of Turkey passed a law concerning new rules and procedure by which Turkey's future head of state would be elected. According to this law, Turkey's next head of state was to be elected by popular vote, in lieu of the Parliament, for the first time since Republican Turkey was founded. Based on the official election results, the former Prime Minister and head of the ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected in the first round as the 12th President of the Republic of Turkey for a period of five years, winning more than 52% of the votes on 10. August 2014.¹ The other two candidates were Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu and Selahattin Demirtaş, who received 38.44% and 9.76% of the votes respectively.

At first glance, this election seems to be a regular one, yet the new legal condition has not only affected the procedural electoral system, but has also directly influenced the political atmosphere. In other words, during previous presidential election periods, Turkey would have discussions about the leaders, the nominated citizens and public figures, the potential candidates, the political parties, debating which would have enough seats to elect their candidate into the national parliament, and the candidate-based coalitions. Despite all these old political and social habits, in the last presidential election Turkey preferred to debate on the candidates' ideological perspectives and commitments.

The main reason for this is the new electoral system, which provides new powers to the head of the state. These new powers include greater political legitimacy and a number of constitutional rights and responsibilities, such as a more active role in both domestic politics and foreign policy, a political mandate to deliver on election promises, a larger representative capacity of the public and a more powerful role in ensuring good working relations between state

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¹ N.N. 2014. *Erdoğan's Time in Turkey*. *Hürriyet Daily News*, 11. August 2014. (accessed: 24. August 2014).

bodies.² In this respect, the candidates' backgrounds and their approaches to previous political events become prominent points. Therefore, it is possible to argue that it is quite complicated to understand the election process and its future potential without clarifying the recent political and social atmosphere in Turkey.

In this respect, this article will first clarify four main considerable events that happened in the past two years and that continue to have an effect on Turkey. The first one is the Gezi Park Protests, which started as an attempt to protect a green area and then expanded to all over the country as a way to protest the AKP government and the Prime Minister Erdoğan's policy. The second event is the corruption scandal that was directly related to some ministers and their relatives. The third one is the tension between the AKP and the Hizmet Movement that has ignited after the corruption scandal in both political and social arenas. The last event is the explosion at a coalmine in Soma, caused by an underground mine fire, which appears to be the worst labour accident in Turkey.

Secondly, this article is going to disclose the presidential election candidates' main qualifications, sources of support, mottos and campaign strategies. Furthermore, in this section I will not only note the percentage of votes each candidate received, but I will also point out what is happening in Turkey's political state of affairs by explaining the meaning of these percentages. The last part of the article will be about what the new president and the government mean for the main political system discussions.

Turkey's Recent Milestones

The Gezi Park Protests

"This is just the beginning, the struggle will continue." This slogan clearly showed that the protests in Turkey would extend far beyond the intention of saving a park in the centre of İstanbul. The point I am trying to make is that, without any doubt, the protests that started in May 2013 have been a turning point for Turkey's political and social life. Therefore, it is important to clarify that some prominent scholars and thinkers of our day have been trying to categorize these protests as the public reaction to Turkey's recent economic and political structural rules. For instance, Michael Hardt³, Antonio Negri⁴, Noam Chomsky⁵ and Slavoj Žižek⁶ have identified the main reasons for this protest by referring to neo-liberal normative bases of a capitalist economic system and its destruction, as well as to an inner autocracy of representative liberal democracy, which have been directly related to the AKP's and Erdoğan's

² Turkey Institute. 2014. *Heading Towards the Day of Presidential Elections in Turkey*. (accessed: 3. November 2014).

³ Hardt, Michael. 2014. *Innovation and Obstacles in Istanbul One Year After Gezi*. (accessed: 3. November 2014).

⁴ Horinek, Dominic. 2014. *Antonio Negri and Gezi Park – Theory and experience*. (accessed: 3. November 2014).

⁵ N.N. 2014. *Gezi Protests and Noam Chomsky's Interview on Anti-democratic System*. (accessed: 3. November 2014).

⁶ Žižek, Slavoj. 2014. *Trouble in Paradise*. (accessed: 3. November 2014).

polices. In addition, they have also shown protestors how to achieve much more non-discrimination by using their declarations.

Moreover, protests in Turkey are quite extraordinary when compared to Western, Eastern and Arab examples. To understand the Turkish case, it should be noted that on 27. May 2013 excavators attempted to demolish the Taksim Gezi Park, an urban green space in the Istanbul city-centre, as part of the “Taksim Pedestrianization Project.” The government aimed to replace the Gezi Park with a reconstruction of the historical Halil Pasha Artillery Barracks that would host shopping malls, residences, etc.⁷ This attempt was one of the typical assaults of the AKP government to turn the entire country into a great building site in line with its neoliberal urban policies.

The protests to save the park and Taksim Square by a group of environmentalists turned into a nationwide uprising with almost 3 million participants and protests in 79 cities across Turkey. According to the Turkish Medical Association report dated 10. July 2013, there were 5 deaths and 8.000 injuries in 13 cities. Among these, 61 people had severe injuries, 104 had head traumas and 11 lost their eyesight.⁸ The main reason for this grievous situation was the AKP government’s harsh policy against the protestors.

The most interesting and valuable element when examining these protests in comparison to the ones in the rest of the world was the diversity of participants. Socialist groups, social democrats, Kemalist groups, non-Muslim and non-Turkish minorities, workers, middle class members, secular nationalists, left-wing Islamists and members of the Alevi population, football fans supporting opposing teams, LGBT organizations, large masses of people with no particular party or group affiliation and people from different professional backgrounds were on the ground.⁹ Both the old and the young went out into the streets, chanted slogans, clashed with the police, occupied parks and acted in solidarity with one another.

Moreover, the May 2013 protests in Turkey developed into a reaction to different political and social issues. This process has a problematic and catastrophic background, which is very much related to the AKP’s and Mr. Erdoğan’s harsh political conduct against almost all public groups that stood against his main ideas. In other words, Gezi Park embraced protests that were directly against the AKP’s harsh social and economic policies and Mr. Erdoğan’s angry, segregating and polarised discourse. From that point of view, the Gezi Park case is among the key determinative ones for the voters during the presidential election.

⁷ Connor, Ryan. 2013. *The Halil Connection: The Story of Gezi Park*. (accessed: 12. November 2014).

⁸ Amnesty International Report. 2013. *Gezi Park Protest. Brutal Denial of the Right to Peaceful Assembly in Turkey*. (accessed: 12. November 2014).

⁹ Konda. 2014. *Gezi Raporu. Toplumun ‘Gezi Parkı Olayları’ algısı Gezi Parkındakiler kimlerdi?* (accessed:12. November 2014).

Corruption Scandals and the Tension between the AKP and the Hizmet Movement

In the early years of the AKP government, a sort of liberal transformation was launched into the Republic of Turkey's legal and political structures. The AKP acted in accordance with European Union criteria regarding the principles of liberty, freedom of religion and democratization in areas like educational reform, the open market economy and military guardianship.¹⁰ From this point of view, it is possible to argue that the AKP created a huge coalition that embraced different groups, such as liberals, prominent scholars, columnists, key members of the financial sector, Muslim and non-Muslim groups, ethnic minorities and civil society organizations, by using these arguments.¹¹ At that point Mr. Erdoğan played a prominent role in the establishment of these normative and practical coalitions.

Among these social coalition partners of the AKP, the Hizmet Movement should be defined as a special ally. The Hizmet Movement is a network organised under the ideas of the Islamic scholar and preacher Fethullah Gülen, who is the indisputable moral and ideal vanguard of the Movement. The Hizmet Movement has a contemporary Islamic core, which is transnational and voluntary. It is said that the Hizmet Movement has expanded to almost 160 countries in the world by using its voluntary workers in its educational centres. In this respect, it is related to both Turkey's and the world's economic, social and political issues.¹²

Whereas the other coalition partners had supported the AKP and its policies in one or two areas, the Hizmet Movement has been actively working with the AKP both in Turkey and abroad. Moreover, the AKP cadres and the Hizmet Movement's volunteers share a common social background, in contrast to some of the AKP's other informal coalition partners. According to Berna Turam, the Hizmet Movement and the AKP had been working in a direct coalition up to 2009-2010. She also argues that the Hizmet Movement not only supported the AKP's policies and decisions, but also had a substantial influence on them. From this point of view, it is possible to argue that the Hizmet Movement supported the AKP by using its intellectual platforms, media and public figures. Therefore, the Hizmet Movement was also working as a soft power of the AKP government by using their schools and cultural activities outside of Turkey. Meanwhile, through the AKP government, members of the Hizmet Movement managed to reach the top positions in the state bureaucracy. This seems logical as they shared common values and perspectives for Turkey's future.¹³

Despite the fact that this coherent coalition seemed to continue for ages, the relationship worsened after 2010 because of their perspective differences regarding foreign policy, education, communal rights and individual and media

¹⁰ Uzgel, İlhan and Bülent Duru. 2013. *AKP: Bir Dönüşümün Bilançosu*. Ankara: Phoenix Yayınevi, 14-15.

¹¹ Uzgel and Duru. *AKP: Bir Dönüşümün Bilançosu*, 17-18.

¹² Öztürk, Ahmet Erdi. 2014. *Tension Between AKP and the Hizmet Movement*. Unpublished MA Thesis, Barcelona Autonomia University, 23-25.

¹³ Çakır, Ruşen and Semih Sakallı. 2014. *100 Soruda Erdoğan-Gülen Savaşı*. İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 56.

freedoms. In addition to these, the biggest tension began with the 17 December and 25. December 2013 corruption investigations that involved the prime minister at the time and some other ministers of the cabinet. According to the government, the Hizmet Movement was actually trying to perform a civil coup d'état through these judicial investigations. On the contrary, I argue that the AKP government was trying to pacify the Hizmet Movement by counteractions in light of the abovementioned differences in various policies. According to Mr. Erdoğan, the Hizmet Movement is not a civil society organization, but a sort of illegal one that stood against the elected government and the state. Thus, Mr. Erdoğan started to talk and establish judicial policies against both Fethullah Gülen and the movement's voluntary activities, including schools, intellectual platforms and charity organisations. Print and social media characterized the government's actions as a "witch-hunt" against the Hizmet Movement.¹⁴

At the end of the day, the tension between Mr. Erdoğan and the Hizmet Movement is without a doubt of vital importance for both Turkey and internationally. Therefore, despite the fact that Mr. Erdoğan won the presidential election, the tension is still present and has been causing shifts among Mr. Erdoğan's and the Hizmet Movement's fans.

The Soma Mine Accident

Mining accidents are common in Turkey because of poor safety conditions. According to a report issued in 2010 by the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (*Türkiye Ekonomi Politikaları Araştırma Vakfı*, TEPAV), there were 7.22 deaths per 1 million ton of coal mined in Turkey in 2008. This is the highest figure in the world, 5 times the rate in China (1.27) and 361 times the rate in the US (0.02). Official statistics record that more than 3,000 coal miners died in mining accidents from 1941 to April 2014. In 2012, 78 miners were killed in accidents, while 95 died in 2013.¹⁵

On 13 May 2014, there was an explosion at a coalmine in Soma, Manisa caused by an underground mine fire that went on until 15 May. In total, 301 people were killed in the worst mining disaster in Turkey's history. According to experts, scholars and some prominent investigative journalists, the main reason for the accident was the neglect of the private mining company, which should have been under government audit.¹⁶ In other words, it is possible to argue that patronage relations between the government and some private companies happen to be the main cause for the accident.

Despite the fact that the government was one of the major liable parties, after the accident Mr. Erdoğan acted as if they had the upper hand. For instance, he had badly misjudged the Soma disaster by delivering an insensitive speech bristling with self-defence. He also addressed the relatives of the deceased miners with the statement that "these types of incidents are ordinary things."¹⁷

¹⁴ Çakır and Sakallı. 2014. *100 Soruda*, 54.

¹⁵ Arslahan, Selin and Hüseyin Ekrem Cünedioğlu. 2014. *Madenlerde Yaşanan İş Kazaları ve Sonuçları Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme*. (accessed: 14. November 2014).

¹⁶ Arslahan and Cünedioğlu. *Madenlerde Yaşanan*. (accessed: 14. November 2014).

¹⁷ Yetkin, Murat. 2014. *Not Easy for Erdoğan to Play the Victim in Soma*. *Hurriyet Daily News*, 20. May 2014. (accessed: 14. November 2014).

This was his way of deflecting any kind of responsibility for the blast in the wake of reports that the government ignored safety concerns about the privately owned mine, which were raised as recently as two weeks prior by opposition MPs. Therefore, the government and its media mouthpieces had jumped into self-defence mode and Mr. Erdoğan's speech was typical of the belligerence that marks his response to any kind of criticism. Moreover, he recounted a long list of mining disasters that occurred abroad, stretching back to a British disaster in 1862, and lingered on accidents that occurred in America, a country that "has every kind of technology."¹⁸ His advisors seemed to have spent precious hours researching foreign mining history, instead of coming up with a detailed course of action to assure the public of Mr. Erdoğan's commitment to finding those both directly and indirectly responsible for the blast.

All in all, the government and Mr. Erdoğan's attitudes to all these events in Turkey in the recent past were both angry and reactive towards the citizens who have suffered. Therefore, the Soma mine accident was a significant example of the workers' conditions and the general attitude of the AKP government. I can easily argue that after the Soma mine accident, labour safety emerged as an important topic of debate among those candidates running against Mr. Erdoğan.

The Presidential Election: The Candidates, the Election Period and the Result

On 20. January 2012 the Turkish Parliament passed an act containing new rules and procedures by which Turkey's next head of state would be elected. The head of state was to be elected by a popular vote, in lieu of the Parliament of the Republic of Turkey, on 10. August 2014. This would be the first time the head of state would be elected in such a way since the country was founded. This was actually more significant in light of the fact that President Abdullah Gül's seven-year term was coming to an end.

Given that Turkey's next president was to be elected by a popular vote, the presidential elections took on a character very reminiscent of the US presidential elections. The candidates could accept personal donations for their campaigns, with the caveat that an individual donor could not donate more than 8.259 TL (approximately 2.950 €) per candidate. What is different from the US presidential elections, however, was that the electorate was being denied the valued opportunity of a presidential debate. Two of the candidates had publicly expressed their willingness to take part in such a debate, while Mr. Erdoğan had remained quiet on the issue.

For the presidential elections on 10. August, there were three candidates. Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was the AKP candidate. Prof. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, the Secretary-General of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) from 2004 to 2014, was a candidate of Turkey's two main opposition parties - the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) – as well as nine smaller

¹⁸ Yetkin. *Not Easy for Erdoğan*.

political parties from the various ends of the political spectrum. Finally, the third candidate was Mr. Selahattin Demirtaş, who was the Turkish/Kurdish candidate of the Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) and who had the support of seven other political parties from the left.

I should now give some basic information about the candidates and their campaigns. First of all, Mr. Erdoğan used his social validation as a means to turn his presidential candidacy into a social acceptance through strategic PR initiatives. Adopting conciliatory rhetoric, in contrast to previous elections in which he ran, he introduced himself as an inclusive candidate with the slogan "Man of the People." However, I can argue that Mr. Erdoğan's campaign strategy was actually based on standing up against the Hizmet Movement and the groups that were directly opposing the AKP. On the other hand, despite the fact that Prof. Ekmelleddin İhsanoğlu tried to create an inclusive campaign path, he was not successful because of his conservative background. In other words, he could not consolidate the young social democrats and leftists, who played an active role during the Gezi Park Protests, because of his conservative background. Therefore, he could not consolidate the CHP and MHP supporters, as he did not find a common propaganda tactic. I can argue that, in contrast to the others, Mr. Selahattin Demirtaş's campaign strategy was the most significant and successful one. Although his campaign budget was relatively tight, he managed to have a huge impact on the population. One of the main reasons for this was that he had a spirited and effective discourse. In addition to that, he managed to give the voters positive energy by getting into close contact with them.¹⁹

The campaign was marred by inequality of media coverage provided for the three candidates. For example, between 14 and 20 July, the campaign coverage time allocated for the three candidates on the national state news channel the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (*Türkiye Radyo ve Televizyon Kurumu*, TRT) was as follows: Erdoğan – 8 hours, İhsanoğlu – 3 hours and Demirtaş – 1.5 hours. The inequality was even greater in the earlier weeks of the official campaign period. As a result, the Supreme Committee of Elections fined the TRT after the election due to its unequal campaign coverage time distribution.

According to the main results, Erdoğan became the 12th President of the Turkish Republic when he managed to win more than 50% of the valid votes, even though this corresponds to only 37% of the total registered electorate. In this respect, I should give some information about the turnout rates in order to clarify the level of legitimacy of the election. The first startling aspect of this election was that the turnout rates were apparently lower than at the previous local and general elections. For instance, whereas the turnout rates were 89% and 91% in İstanbul and Ankara for the local elections in March 2014, in the presidential election they were reflected as 71% and 76% respectively. An overall turnout of 74% seems to have a significant impact on the first round's outcome. According to the preliminary observations and analysis, the main reasons behind this lower rate are the unsatisfied voters' decisions to boycott the elections, the summer holiday and the university students and seasonal

¹⁹ Turkey Institute. *Heading Towards*. (accessed: 3. November 2014).

workers' inability to cast their votes in their own constituencies. In this respect, 51.8% was sufficient for Mr. Erdoğan to become the first president of Turkey elected by a popular vote, which gives him the leverage to redesign certain aspects of the state apparatus in the upcoming period. However, this delicate percentage may also lead him to reconsider his stance and discourse for further policy-making decisions, particularly in his ambition to initiate a constitutional change in the current parliamentary system.²⁰

Although Prof. İhsanoğlu was nominated as a candidate for the presidential election by two mainstream opposition parties (the CHP and the MHP) on the basis of aiming to attract the median voter preferences, 38% signifies that his lower popularity in the eyes of the Turkish public, alongside a lack of charismatic leadership, prevented him from winning the election. On the other hand, Mr. Selahattin Demirtaş performed relatively well during the election and increased the votes for his party to almost 10%. Besides, his stance may make a contribution to the political life in Turkey as long as he keeps up the encompassing democratic discourse in further public discussions.

The New Government after the Presidential Election

The election results might have a number of consequences for Turkish politics. First, if President Erdoğan intends to put his pre-election viewpoint into action, then the status of democracy and rule of law in Turkey would be exacerbated. Secondly, Prof. İhsanoğlu's failure in the elections may encourage dissidents in the CHP and the MHP to speak up against the current leadership. And finally, Kurdish political actors are likely to become publicly more visible, as well as to be active in solving Turkey's lingering problems. Despite these optimistic expectations, it currently seems that all the issues have remained almost the same in Turkey. In other words, Turkey has been discussing the tension between the AKP and the Hizmet Movement and coming face to face with new labour accidents and some protest movements regarding different issues. Moreover, Mr. Erdoğan's harsh and segregating attitude has not changed after he won the election. His new presidential palace, the White Palace (*Beyaz Saray*), and new presidential plane are some of the other topics of dispute due to legacy and budgetary problems.

In addition, Turkey now has a new government and Prime Minister. Turkey's 62nd government was formed and announced by the 26. Prime Minister of the Turkish Republic, Prof. Ahmet Davutoğlu, on 29. August 2014. During the days following the cabinet formation, PM Davutoğlu unveiled a road map of his government that placed a strong emphasis on the economy, a dialogue-oriented foreign policy and a more democratic environment in domestic politics. In tune with Davutoğlu's public speeches, as well as the statements in the government's road map, Turkey now needs a number of concrete actions and policies to reach those targets concerning an advanced democracy, sustainable economic development and a rational/balanced foreign policy. In other words, for the domestic political arena, a new government should play a leading role in

²⁰ Turkey Institute. *Heading Towards*. (accessed: 3. November 2014).

establishing a well-functioning democracy on the basis of deliberative political participation.²¹

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²¹ Doğan, Salih / Erkoç, Taptuk Emre and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk. 2014. *What Turkey Needs From Davutoğlu Government*. (accessed: 20. November 2014).