

TURKEY UPDATE

*October 15, 2010***Erdogan's Referendum Victory and Turkish Politics**

On September 12, Turkish voters decisively approved a package of constitutional amendments sponsored by the governing Justice and Development Party (JDP). The final result was 57.88 percent in favor to 42.12 percent against with 73.71 percent of registered voters participating. The referendum was yet another electoral triumph for Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the latest in a series stretching back to 1994 when he was first elected Mayor of Istanbul from the Welfare Party. Since then, Erdogan has won two parliamentary elections, two municipal elections and two constitutional referenda.

While there was a general expectation of approval by the Turkish electorate, most opinion polls had predicted a closer result. Consequently, there had been widespread speculation prior to the referendum that Erdogan may have taken an unnecessary risk for himself and his party less than a year before parliamentary elections have to be held. However, Erdogan had once again judged the public mood accurately, as he showed by declaring in advance of the vote that over 55 percent would back the changes.

Those claiming that Erdogan might confront a difficult task had pointed to the possibility of Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the new leader of the Republican People's Party (RPP), having greater success than his predecessor Deniz Baykal in appealing to voters and, in particular, persuading them that Erdogan and the JDP intended to further weaken restraints on their exercise of political power. It was also argued that the National Action Party (NAP) under its leader Devlet Bahceli would be able to take advantage of a nationalist reaction to discussion of government concessions to Kurdish demands. At the same time, it was suggested that the call for a boycott by the Peace and Democracy Party (PDP) and Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party, because of the denial of their political demands, would deprive Erdogan of a significant number of likely 'yes' votes from the Southeast.

In fact, with less than ten percent of the voters casting their ballot with reference to the amendments, according to pollster Tarhan Erdem who had correctly predicted the outcome, the inevitable transformation of the constitutional referendum into a referendum on Erdogan's leadership effectively played into his hands. Erdogan invested his considerable political capital into the campaign by holding rallies in more than a third of Turkey's provinces, conducting numerous TV interviews and personally directing the massive nationwide effort by the formidable JDP organization to ensure a 'yes' vote.

The timing of the referendum, on the thirtieth anniversary of the last full-scale military coup, allowed Erdogan to make maximum use of his main argument during the campaign that the development of Turkish democracy required a revision of the 1982 constitution bequeathed by the military after it had taken over the government in 1980. In addition to frequently invoking the memory of former Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, who was overthrown and subsequently hanged after an earlier military coup in 1960, and repeating his election slogan 'Enough. It is time for the nation to speak,' Erdogan went so far as to say in one TV interview that those who opposed the constitutional changes were effectively "supporting coups."

Although he implicitly apologized for this comment - as well as for his warning that those who failed to back the package would “be eliminated” - by stating immediately after the referendum that he may have gone too far with some of his remarks, Erdogan’s campaign strategy had an impact beyond his party base. It swayed many supporters of the NAP, who had suffered in the aftermath of the 1980 coup, as well as a smaller number of liberals with an aversion to vestiges of military rule. It is noteworthy that Erdogan claimed after the vote that Turkey had “crossed a historic threshold towards advanced democracy and the supremacy of law” and that “the regime of tutelage would come to an end.”

In retrospect, it seems apparent that the opposition parties inadvertently played into Erdogan’s hand and strengthened the JDP prior to elections by refraining from cooperation in the process of amending the constitution in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA). This was in contrast to most of the sixteen previous occasions when the 1982 constitution was amended, especially between 2002 and 2004 when additional reforms were undertaken in order to conform to the Copenhagen Criteria for eligibility for EU accession. To be sure, the JDP had raised concerns of a constitutional overreach by introducing the reform package in the TGNA in March soon after a crisis with the Supreme Board of Prosecutors and Judges. Erdogan had then accused the judicial establishment of “interfering in executive and legislative powers” and sarcastically remarked that “maybe the judiciary ought to be allowed to govern.” His political opponents were prompted to argue that, having confronted and weakened the military establishment which had previously acted as a check on the exercise of political power by governments, Erdogan was now aiming to do the same thing to the judicial establishment.

While most of the proposed amendments addressed generally accepted issues like the rights of women and children, the protection of privacy and collective bargaining for civil servants, they also included more controversial items such as permitting appeals against the Supreme Military Council’s personnel discharge decisions and the trial of military officers in civilian courts. More significantly, there were two amendments relating to the composition of the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors, giving the President and the TGNA unprecedented power in electing their members, and another making the closure of political parties more difficult by requiring the approval of a parliamentary commission and a two-thirds majority in the TGNA.

The RPP boycotted the proceedings in the TGNA after the JDP refused to take these three amendments out of the package. With the PDP joining the RPP in boycotting most of the votes in the TGNA and the NAP consistently voting against the amendments, the JDP had been unable to get enough votes for a two-thirds majority of 367 in the 550 member assembly to legislatively transform the amendments into law. However, the reform package, with one very important exception, had received more than the required 330 votes by May 7 in order to be submitted to a referendum following President Abdullah Gul’s approval and a subsequent rejection of the RPP’s appeal to the Constitutional Court asking it to declare the proposed changes unconstitutional.

It is significant that the only amendment which could not make it into the final referendum package, as it had only received 327 votes due to defections within the JDP parliamentary group, was the one relating to the banning of political parties. This was arguably the most important amendment for the JDP from the political perspective as it had faced the very real threat of closure by the Constitutional Court in 2008 and had escaped by a single vote.

LOOKING AHEAD

The JDP has now been in office for almost eight years and Erdogan’s unbroken record of electoral success strongly suggests that he may have found the magic formula to make his party resistant to the unavoidable loss of appeal that normally comes with being in government for a long time. Consequently, barring a sudden downturn in the economy or a similar unexpected development, Erdogan’s seemingly invincible dominance of

the Turkish political scene seems set to continue with a third successive general election triumph by the JDP in 2011, a feat unmatched by any political party since the Democrat Party in the 1950's.

Erdogan possesses a rare combination of charismatic leadership, organizational and communication skills which none of his political opponents have hitherto been able to match. He has also been able to fully utilize his party's financial strength and operational prowess at the grassroots level which far exceed those of the opposition. In addition, Erdogan and the JDP continue to benefit from the contrast still apparently vivid in the minds of voters between the positive performance of the economy under the JDP government and its mismanagement and steep decline immediately prior to the November 2002 elections. Although there are rising concerns over the fact that the recent high growth rates are over dependent on the massive influx of short term funds attracted by high interest and a favorable lira/dollar exchange rate, Turkish businessmen who have prospered during the past eight years are enthusiastic supporters of the JDP. Equally importantly, the JDP government also enjoys greater support from the Turkish media than many of its predecessors, a product either of conviction or a desire to avoid a rebuke.

Under Erdogan's leadership, the JDP has been consolidating its support within the more devout segment of society by endeavoring to ensure the effective backing of the influential movement inspired by Fethullah Gulen. It is noteworthy that Gulen's call for a 'yes' vote from his residence in the United States drew an oblique expression of gratitude from Erdogan on the night of the referendum. However, the JDP has also been successful in extending its appeal beyond its Islamist heritage by tapping into the rich vein of voters in the center right with traditionally conservative and religious values who had previously ensured the electoral victories of Adnan Menderes and his Democrat Party, Suleyman Demirel and his Justice Party and Turgut Ozal and his Motherland Party. Having thus effectively taken over the center right that has tended to dominate Turkish politics since the advent of multiparty democracy in 1950, the JDP has, in addition, managed to make inroads into the NAP's nationalist base of support.

Nonetheless, despite all of these considerable advantages, Erdogan has not opted to bring forward the date of the parliamentary elections to try to ride the momentum of his referendum victory. Notwithstanding the consensus within the JDP that just over 40 percent of the 55 percent 'yes' votes would go to the JDP in the next elections - less than the 46.58 percent it received in the 2007 election but enough to ensure that it would continue to govern on its own - he has confirmed that they will be held as scheduled next summer. Erdogan has instead reached out to those who had voted 'no' while simultaneously demanding an examination by his party of these voters' motivation. Although he has every right to be confident about the short term political prospects of the JDP, as an extremely astute politician, Erdogan may have some concerns over the possible longer term implications of the strength and durability of the opposition demonstrated in the referendum. While the 'yes' votes in the two biggest Turkish cities, Istanbul and Ankara, along with those in most of Central Anatolia and the Black Sea coast had ensured victory, all of the Aegean and Mediterranean coastal provinces had voted 'no' while the boycott had been effective to varying degrees in the Southeast.

Having previously declared that the 2011 parliamentary elections will be his "third and last", argued that a switch to a presidential system would be good for Turkey and allowed prominent members of his party to suggest that he would be the best candidate for the presidency, it seems fair to surmise that Erdogan will eventually want to move into the Cankaya Palace. The presidential elections may be held as early as 2012 if the Higher Electoral Council decides that the term in office of Gul, who was elected by the TGNA from within the ranks of the JDP in 2007, will be five years instead of seven in accordance with the constitutional amendment approved in a referendum after his election. The amendment also mandated that the president be elected in the future by popular ballot. Consequently, if he were to ultimately decide to run for president, Erdogan would have a major incentive to try to reduce the degree of polarization in the country. That would require assuaging the concerns of those who fear a further weakening of the secular system. However, as the Higher Electoral Council is not due to make its final decision on the length of the presidential term until early 2012, Erdogan's immediate focus will be on winning the upcoming parliamentary elections and in formulating a new constitution, as he

confirmed after the referendum, which would replace rather than merely amend the existing constitution, presumably with considerably enhanced powers for the president.

It is a political axiom that the strength of governing parties in democratic systems is directly related to the weakness of the opposition. Therefore, given the decline of the NAP and the failure to resurrect a party with genuine appeal in the center right, Erdogan and the JDP's ability to sustain their domination of the Turkish political scene will inevitably depend on the RPP's inability to constitute a credible alternative. Kilicdaroglu had unexpectedly assumed the leadership of the RPP in May following the release of a compromising video of his predecessor and had found himself immediately thrust into the struggle over the constitutional amendments. Although he conducted a vigorous campaign and toured even more provinces than Erdogan, Kilicdaroglu's messages were occasionally confusing. He also suffered the embarrassment of being unable to cast his vote in the referendum due to complications with his registration. Nonetheless, with the RPP's current share of the votes generally estimated at over 30 percent, Kilicdaroglu embarks on the extended election campaign with a stronger base of support than Baykal and with legitimate hopes of improving the 20.88 percent his party received in the 2007 general elections.

Kilicdaroglu would surely not deny that he lacks Erdogan's charisma and oratorical skills. Even more importantly, he has yet to demonstrate that he has the political acumen of his opponent in retaining his party's core of supporters while widening its appeal beyond its base. Kilicdaroglu's ability to undertake this difficult task will require a revision of the general perception of the RPP among a considerable portion of Turkish voters as the resolute defender of an unsustainable status quo in a country going through profound social changes, particularly with respect to accommodating the growing religiosity in a secular system. It is doubtful that Kilicdaroglu can manage this feat - last achieved by the RPP in the 1973 elections under Bulent Ecevit when the party attracted unprecedented numbers of voters with its social democratic message - with the ineffective party apparatus, seemingly comfortable with the role of a permanent minority, he has inherited.

Kilicdaroglu will also need to somehow change the widespread external view of the RPP as a xenophobic and unreliable interlocutor which need not be taken seriously as an alternative to the JDP government. The JDP skillfully bolstered its domestic support in office by beginning accession negotiations with the European Union, maintaining close relations with the United States and earning the confidence of the international financial community. It remains to be seen whether Kilicdaroglu can exploit questions which have arisen beyond Turkey's borders parallel to the activism of the JDP government in foreign policy while trying to emulate Erdogan's success in achieving the international credibility and stature essential for any Turkish leader in the increasingly interdependent world.

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