

TURKEY UPDATE

*June 2, 2011***Turkey's June 12 Elections: Will Erdogan Maintain His Ascendance?**

Turkish voters go to the ballot boxes on June 12, 2011 to decide if the governing Justice and Development Party (JDP), which has been in office for just over eight and a half years, will win its third successive general electoral victory. Almost every opinion poll published before the June 2 deadline on election propaganda has shown a clear lead for Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's party and it will be a stunning surprise, comparable to that of the triumph which brought it into power in November 2002, if the JDP fails to win comfortably.

In the last general elections in July 2007, the JDP received 46.58 percent and thus increased its share of the vote by almost 12 percent compared to the 2002 elections. However, as the table below shows, the JDP's seats in the 550 member Turkish General National Assembly (TGNA) actually decreased from 363 to 341 as the National Action Party (NAP), which had failed to pass the 10 percent national threshold for parliamentary representation in the previous elections, succeeded in entering the TGNA in 2007.

		Justice and Development Party (JDP)		Republican People's Party (RPP)		National Action Party (NAP)	
		Percentage	Seats	Percentage	Seats	Percentage	Seats
Voter turn out							
79.10%	2002	34.28	363	19.39	178	8.36	0
84.24%	2007	46.58	341	20.88	112	14.27	70

Consequently, the primary criterion for judging the electoral success of the JDP on June 12 will not be its percentage of votes or that of its main opponent, the Republican People's Party (RPP) under Kemal Kilicdaroglu, but the ability of the NAP to enter the TGNA again as this will determine the JDP's final tally of seats.

Pursuing a Presidential System on the Parliamentary Campaign Trail

While he is seeking votes for his party rather than himself, it would not be an exaggeration to characterize the election as a referendum on Erdogan and, more accurately, on his project to redesign the Turkish political system. To be sure, retaining power by obtaining a majority in the TGNA with 276 seats or more and equaling the hitherto unmatched record of Adnan Menderes - the leader of the Democrat Party who had won three successive elections in 1950, 1954 and 1957 before being overthrown in the 1960 coup - would constitute a notable achievement for Erdogan. However, his goals clearly go well beyond this laudable target. Ideally he

would hope to obtain a two thirds majority of 367 in the TGNA that would enable him to get easy legislative approval for a new constitution - repeatedly identified by Erdogan as his post-election objective - without having to resort to a referendum, which would be necessary if the JDP's final seat tally is between 330 and 367. A total above 276 but below 330, which effectively forecloses the referendum option, would therefore be a source of disappointment for him.

Erdogan has strongly indicated his desire to assume the presidency – probably in 2014 - after the adoption of a new constitution transforming the current parliamentary form of government into a presidential system. He has also confirmed numerous times during the campaign that the next parliamentary term in the TGNA would be his last in accordance with the JDP's self-imposed three term limit. As he is very unlikely to be contemplating early retirement at the peak of his political power, it seems fair to conclude that he views the upcoming elections as an important stepping stone to seeking even greater authority.

Erdogan kicked off his election campaign by unveiling a manifesto with the audacious title: Turkey is Ready, Target 2023. “With the self confidence and successful performance of the last eight years,” the manifesto proclaimed, the JDP “is not only preparing the next four years’ program but at the same time laying the foundations for the centennial [of the Republic] in 2023.” This was surely the clearest signal yet that Erdogan is planning to be in power for 12 more years, during which there would be two elections for five year presidential terms.

During the past quarter century, two former Turkish Prime Ministers, Turgut Ozal and Suleyman Demirel, chose to ascend to the presidency. However, Erdogan, who exercises a degree of influence over his own party, as well as the national political agenda, that would be envied by his predecessors, does not seem eager to follow in their footsteps without significantly enhancing the powers of the president. It is worth noting that changing the constitution to permit such an unprecedented and radical transformation of the political system is a difficult undertaking. Moreover, there is no general consensus on this controversial idea even in the JDP. The current president, Abdullah Gul, along with Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc and TGNA Speaker Mehmet Ali Sahin, have recently expressed “reservations” about a presidential system. In fact, Arinc has gone so far as to say that “Turkey would be much better off with the current parliamentary system.”

It is unlikely that such open questioning of his political plans from within the ranks of his party will sway Erdogan. Particularly since the elevation of Gul to the presidency in 2007, he has increasingly been making decisions on his own. He has also become less open to views different to his and more intolerant of criticism. Erdogan demonstrated his firm control of the JDP by entering the electoral fray with a list of candidates he personally finalized through a process in which loyalty to him as much as political effectiveness was a determining factor. He chose not to re-nominate over half of the JDP parliamentarians in the outgoing TGNA - 187 out of 331 - of which only 20 had voluntarily asked to be excluded. While re-nominating all the current members of his cabinet except for one, Erdogan subjected them to a major reshuffle between provinces in an effort to bolster the JDP performance. This included moving a reportedly reluctant Arinc, effectively the second person in the party, from his home province of Manisa to Bursa.

Dismissing the RPP, Targeting the NAP and Alienating the Kurds

Erdogan has inevitably been the dominant figure in the campaign, fully utilizing the immense advantages of incumbency along with the superb organizational capabilities and financial resources of the JDP. Relying on his considerable charisma, he has endeavored to maximize his direct personal appeal to voters - evident in the past two general elections and, to an even greater extent, in the 2010 constitutional referendum which produced an overwhelming approval - and to thus again serve effectively as an engine pulling his party to electoral success. Visually as well as rhetorically, Erdogan has been cultivating an impression of supreme confidence and invincibility while touting the successes of the JDP, especially with respect to the economy and foreign policy.

Comparing the high growth rates and the current gross domestic product of 740 billion dollars achieved under the JDP with the difficult economic conditions before the 2002 elections, Erdogan has been claiming that Turkey is on its way to become one of the top ten economies in the world with a 25,000 dollar per capita income. He has been reminding his listeners at virtually every campaign stop that the JDP government had constructed new high-speed railroads, highways, tunnels, airports and housing complexes throughout the country. He has also been unveiling ambitious future projects, including 'Canal Istanbul' which would create a new waterway through Istanbul parallel to the Bosphorus. Erdogan has been boasting that Turkey was "not only the biggest economy but also the most influential political power in its region." According to him, "as a leader country, Turkey does not stand on the sidelines anymore" but with "the JDP's visionary foreign policy, it determines the agenda." However, it is noteworthy that during his campaign he has chosen not to focus on any of the important foreign policy issues on the agenda, such as Turkey's stalled EU membership negotiations or tensions with Israel.

Erdogan has been publicly dismissive of the prospects of his main opponent. On May 28 for example, he claimed that Kilicdaroglu's goal was limited to "trying to match or surpass by a single vote" the 20.88 percent his predecessor had obtained in 2007 and that he was therefore not a serious aspirant for national leadership. Erdogan's unchanging message to the voters has been, in essence, one of asking them to stick with him and his party in order to "maintain stability" and to allow them to apply after the elections "the expertise developed in government" instead of choosing opponents who have "not even served their apprenticeship."

It was clear from the outset that the fate of the NAP would be the central question in the campaign. An unnamed senior JDP strategist, for example, was quoted as saying "this [election] will be determined within the nationalist vote." This was underlined after April 29 by a major scandal resulting from the staggered release of secretly recorded tapes, ostensibly by dissident members of the NAP unhappy with Devlet Bahceli and his leadership. The tapes showed major NAP politicians in compromising situations and duly prompted the withdrawal of ten leading candidates from the race. Bahceli reacted by defiantly refusing to accede to the demand conveyed through the tapes that he should resign and then hit back by blaming Fethullah Gulen and his followers - who had been very effective in helping Erdogan to ensure a strong yes vote in the constitutional referendum - for organizing the plot against his party. He has since then been focusing his anger against Erdogan and the JDP as the likely beneficiaries of his party's misfortunes.

Despite having initially reacted negatively to a similar tape which had eventually led to the resignation of Deniz Baykal from the leadership of the RPP last year by saying "this kind of personal problem is not our business", Erdogan apparently had no hesitation in seeking to use this scandal to weaken the NAP. He argued: "These women are not their wives and it is therefore not private. It is a general indecency." For good measure, he broadened his attacks over the scandal to also encompass the RPP by charging that Kilicdaroglu had "become party leader as a result of a video tape." However, Erdogan has strenuously denied any involvement in the scandal and blamed "certain political engineers" who were trying to "redesign the NAP after having redesigned the RPP."

With less than two weeks to go to the elections, it is unclear how this scandal will ultimately affect the NAP vote, which, according to all the polls, is hovering around the critical 10 percent threshold. Having shown a colossal lack of political judgment in opening the way to the JDP victory in 2002 by pushing for early elections in the aftermath of a major economic crisis, Bahceli has since then inexplicably failed to capitalize on the surge of Turkish nationalist sentiment. He also suffered the acute embarrassment of losing many of his traditional supporters to Erdogan during the 2010 referendum. Nonetheless, Bahceli has reason to hope that while some voters will refrain from supporting his party because of the scandal, there may also be a reaction against what is being increasingly perceived as a major political conspiracy against the NAP which could encourage past defectors as well as currently wavering voters to provide sufficient backing to allow the NAP to stay above 10 percent.

Even before the current scandal Erdogan had been assiduous in wooing traditionally nationalist voters through assertively patriotic rhetoric, especially on the Kurdish issue. Consequently, the possibility of a backlash which would keep the NAP in the TGNA must be especially worrisome to him as he also faces the very real possibility of losing Kurdish votes. In 2002 the JDP had received 26.56 percent of the votes in the predominantly Kurdish southeast, slightly less than the 27.73 of the Kurdish Democratic People's Party. However, in 2005, Erdogan had made a major bid for additional Kurdish support by declaring in Diyarbakir for the first time that there was "a Kurdish problem" which he characterized as "my problem and our collective problem" and had picked up electoral dividends in the 2007 elections by increasing the JDP's share of votes in the region to 53.14 percent. The Kurdish candidates running as independents in contrast had seen their vote go down to 24.4 percent. Although the JDP government has lifted emergency rule in southeastern Turkey, launched a state-run Kurdish language television channel and even initiated an ultimately abortive major 'Kurdish opening' in 2009, the fall in the JDP's share of votes in the municipal elections in the southeast that year to 38.34, coupled with a rise in those voting for Kurdish independents to 37.40, demonstrated the extent of growing Kurdish disillusionment with Erdogan.

The mutual disaffection between Erdogan and the Kurds has grown during the current campaign. On April 18, the Higher Election Board banned seven independent Kurdish candidates, who were backed by the Peace and Democracy Party (PDP), from running on the grounds that they had terrorism-related convictions. This prompted bloody demonstrations in the southeast as well as in major cities in the west which eventually forced the board to reverse its decision but suspicions of a JDP-backed effort to keep down the vote for Kurdish independents persisted. On May 1, Erdogan further enraged Kurdish politicians and activists by reversing his previous position and proclaiming that there was "no longer a Kurdish question in this country." Three days later, the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) launched a terrorist attack on Erdogan's convoy travelling to a campaign rally and killed a police officer. On May 14, twelve members of the PKK were killed in an operation in the southeast, prompting Selahattin Demirtas, a leading Kurdish politician, to criticize Erdogan by saying "the more PKK members he kills, the more votes he would collect." Erdogan responded by saying "We will never allow separation" and reiterated the slogan "one nation, one flag, one state and one homeland."

The previous Kurdish perception of the JDP as a party challenging the unacceptable status quo in the southeast, which led Kurdish voters in the region as well as in the rest of the country to support it in large numbers, has clearly changed to one in which the JDP is now seen as a resolute defender of the existing order. Erdogan's continuous emphasis on what his government has achieved on the Kurdish issue is falling on deaf ears and he has been getting a very cool reception at his rallies in the southeast because of adherence to civil disobedience and boycott calls by the PDP.

In addition to running 61 independent candidates in southeastern provinces as well as in cities beyond the region with large Kurdish minorities such as Istanbul, Mersin and Adana, the PDP harbors hopes of raising its representation in the TGNA to as much as 35. Its leaders are also calling on Kurds throughout the country to refrain from voting for the JDP. While it remains to be seen how much electoral damage this will inflict on the JDP in the elections, what seems clear is that the PDP - which is implicitly coordinating its strategy with Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK, who recently set June 15 as the final deadline for the beginning of "meaningful negotiations" - is set on escalating its struggle with the JDP government. Aysel Tugluk, of the PDP recently warned ominously that "the Kurds' patience and tolerance have run out" and claimed that they were "ready to establish their own democracy and to live within the system they will establish if this does not happen with the [Turkish] state."

A Kilicdaroglu Surge?

While Erdogan has been preoccupied with keeping nationalist voters in his camp and trying not to lose too many Kurdish backers, Kilicdaroglu has been making some headway in his effort to transform the RPP into a credible opposition. After two crushing defeats suffered at the hands of the JDP electoral juggernaut in 2002

and 2007, it still seems highly unlikely that the RPP can overhaul the JDP or to get close to matching its share of the vote. However, its electoral prospects certainly seem to be brighter under its new leader.

Kilicdaroglu, who first received nationwide recognition with his strong showing as the RPP candidate for mayor of Istanbul in the 2009 municipal elections in which he received 36.80 percent of the vote, has now been heading the RPP for just over a year. A former bureaucrat with a formidable will to win beneath a deceptively mild demeanor, Kilicdaroglu has been refashioning the party to justify his use of the rallying cry of a “new RPP.” He has sought to change the negative image of the RPP as a party seemingly comfortable with the role of a permanent minority by first pushing out Baykal’s veteran colleagues from their positions and then culling them in his purge of current RPP parliamentarians which was even more extensive – 64 out of 101 - than Erdogan’s. Although his nomination of three individuals caught up in the Ergenekon investigations relating to alleged coup plots along with a number of others from the center right prompted criticism from within the party ranks, his goal of expanding the RPP’s appeal beyond its traditional base has found general acceptance.

Kilicdaroglu has been constantly using the slogan ‘Turkey will breathe freely with the RPP’ and endeavoring to take advantage of widespread discontent about what he has been characterizing as “an atmosphere of authoritarianism and suppression” resulting from extensive phone tapping, early morning police raids and indefinite pre-trial incarcerations of hundreds of individuals, including journalists. With a view to encouraging them to shake off their political apathy and to vote, Kilicdaroglu has taken note of the concerns of young people over planned restrictions of access to the internet. Trying to underline his appeal to this potentially important constituency, Kilicdaroglu has highlighted the serious improprieties relating to the nationwide examination for university admission along with the government’s failure to act on this issue. At the same time, he has been vociferous in his denunciation of Erdogan’s harder-line approach on the Kurdish issue in an effort to entice Kurdish voters in the southeast as well as beyond and to get them to make the RPP rather than the JDP their second choice after the PDP. In time-honored fashion, he has also been trying to score political points against Erdogan by leveling corruption allegations, emphasizing the continuing problems of high unemployment and poverty as well as dangers posed by the huge influx of short term external funds and the growing current accounts deficit while promising greater assistance to those in need.

Kilicdaroglu has been trying to avoid the mistake of previous RPP campaigns which had focused too much on the threat to Turkish secularism posed by growing religiosity. Diagnosing correctly that those campaigns had failed largely because of the strong negative reaction of the devout and conservative majority of voters who have consistently sustained center right governments since the advent of multiparty democracy in 1950, Kilicdaroglu has avoided being drawn into polemical debate on that issue despite baiting by Erdogan. He has also not allowed himself to be drawn into opposing Islamic headscarves. While Kilicdaroglu will not pull many votes away from the JDP’s religious base - not least because Erdogan has been constantly drawing attention to his minority Alevi background – he has nonetheless been successful in hampering the ability of the JDP to confront the RPP on this particular battleground. His willingness to openly condemn the military coups in Turkish political history and to declare his opposition to any possible future coup, along with his support for the introduction of civilian ministerial control over the Turkish General Staff (TGS) and the reduction of military service, may also serve him well as it undercuts efforts to negatively portray the RPP as ‘a civilian extension of the TGS.’ Significantly, Kilicdaroglu has also sought to repair the RPP’s relations with the EU and the United States as part of his effort to challenge the JDP’s argument that it is the only party in tune with prevailing international dynamics.

As the campaign has unfolded, Kilicdaroglu has grown more surefooted but it is fair to say that he is not yet as polished as Erdogan, who has been honing his skills since his election as mayor of Istanbul in 1994. Nonetheless, by carefully cultivating his image as the humbler and more accessible antithesis of his opponent, Kilicdaroglu has proved to be a source of much greater concern to Erdogan than Baykal. He has also clearly managed to annoy Erdogan, not least by referring to him as Recep Bey – using the first name his opponent has always chosen to ignore - as well as by taunting him over his unwillingness to engage in a live debate on TV.

Looking into the crystal ball

The two most recent electoral yardsticks which might help indicate the final vote tallies for the two main parties are the 2009 municipal elections and the 2010 constitutional referendum results. The first had seen a decline in the JDP vote to 38.78 percent, an almost eight percent decline from its share of votes in the 2007 general elections. However, the RPP under Baykal had failed to take advantage of the JDP fall as it only increased its vote by 2.5 percentage points over its 2007 performance. In contrast, the referendum on the constitutional changes in September 2010, perceived as a referendum on Erdogan's leadership, had brought a clear victory for the JDP with 57.88 percent voting in favor and 42.12 percent against.

While the referendum result was a notable triumph for the JDP because the RPP, the NAP and the PDP had all campaigned for a no vote, it is not clear how accurate a guide it may be for the upcoming elections. A significant portion of those who voted in favor did not do so because of their support for the JDP but for changes in the judiciary as well as in civilian-military relations. If it is assumed that the JDP was able to carry into the yes column in the referendum all of the voters who supported it in 2009, there is still a question mark over the direction of the additional 19 percent who backed it a year later. Further assuming that half of those votes may go back to the NAP, the PDP and the smaller fringe parties while the JDP retains the other half, then the JDP vote on June 12 is likely to surpass its 46.58 vote in 2007 by a couple of points. A higher level of defection from the yes camp would push it below the 2007 figure, which, it needs to be remembered, reflected the widespread anger against the botched TGS attempt to prevent the election of Abdullah Gul as president. (It is significant that the TGS has been conspicuously silent during the current campaign despite the continuing expansion of the Ergenekon, Sledgehammer and other coup plot investigations into the top ranks of the retired and current military establishment, most recently though the detention on May 31 of a four star general who was slated to become the chief of the Turkish Air Force in August.)

On the other side of the ledger, if it is assumed that 23 percent of the overall 42 percent who voted no last year came from those who had backed the RPP in the 2009 elections, the RPP has reasonable hopes of obtaining the support of the non-RPP voters who voted no in the referendum. It is clear that many of these voters were motivated by concerns over the direction of the country under the JDP and may well see Kilicdaroglu's RPP as the strongest bulwark against it. Consequently, it is possible that the RPP vote may match or even slightly exceed the symbolically significant 30 percent. Needless to say, this would finally transform the party into a serious rival to the JDP.

In the 2002 general elections, the JDP and the RPP had together received close to 54 percent of the votes. In 2007 they had increased their combined percentage to over 67. On June 12, they seem set to obtain between 70 to 80 percent of the votes with the majority of the remaining votes going to the NAP and the PDP candidates running as independents. Consequently, while the NAP is likely to continue to be represented in the next TGNA along with the PDP, what we might well see on June 12 is a consolidation of electoral polarization as Turkey moves closer to the de facto two-party system it lived through a number of times in its political history.

It is interesting that, despite his seemingly unassailable lead in the polls, Erdogan's tone and rhetoric has been reminiscent of previous campaigns in which he focused on a variety of 'injustices' committed against him, his party and his supporters in the name of strict secularism. However, the TGS, the judiciary and the mass media, which were his favorite targets in the past, have been respectively weakened, brought under tighter government control and effectively cowed or co-opted as the JDP accumulated greater power. Consequently, it remains to be seen whether such a style of campaigning, which draws heavily on an 'us and them' theme, will bring similar electoral returns now that it has been refashioned against what Erdogan has been alleging is an "anti-JDP coalition comprising the RPP, the NAP and the PDP." In fact, bracketing these opposition parties together may backfire by encouraging tactical voting against the JDP by their supporters.

On May 29, Erdogan declared on TV that, according to polls available to him, the JDP vote was in “the 45-50 range.” He said that the RPP was in “the 25-30 range” and that the NAP was “just above the 10 percent barrier.” In an earlier TV appearance he had suggested that the JDP representation in the new TGNA would be “between 315 and 335.” A poll released one day before had noted that 14 percent - an unusually high percentage so close to elections - remained undecided. If the increase in the number of voters from 42.57 million in 2007 to 50.19 million in 2011 and the reapportioning of parliamentary seats which has strengthened the representation of Istanbul and other populous provinces are also taken into account, it is clear that there are too many uncertainties for an accurate forecast of the final division of votes on election day. However, what should be clear is that Erdogan and his party machine have been able to find a way to equal or exceed electoral expectations in the past and that it would be unwise to assume that they will not be able to do so again on June 12.

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