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INSIGHTS

The Significance of the Victory by Erdoğan and his "Justice and Development Party" (AKP) in Turkey's Elections

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Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's sweeping victory in Turkey's presidential elections on June 24 significantly strengthens his position and gives him a mandate to continue to shape the face of Turkey as he sees fit, namely, striving for a centralized, authoritarian and repressive regime and continuing the trend of Islamization of the state, effectively turning him into an omnipotent ruler with almost unlimited powers. In the eyes of the Turkish opposition, Erdoğan's victory is a real disaster that destroys the democratic system that he has already chipped away at over his 16 years in office.

It is important to note that Erdoğan strengthened his power back in April 2017 thanks to a referendum in which it was agreed that Turkey would move from a parliamentary to a presidential government system, making the president the head of the army, and giving him the power to appoint ministers, deputy ministers, general prosecutors and half of the Supreme Court justices, deliver orders without the approval of the parliament, and veto the decisions of the Parliament. This means that Erdoğan may realize his vision of strengthening Turkey's Islamic identity and possibly turning it into an Islamic state by the year 2023, which will mark 100 years since its establishment by its founder, Kemal Mustafa Atatürk.

Back in 2002, Erdoğan declared his intention to change the face of the country beyond recognition. There were those who thought that these were political slogans, but in practice Erdoğan was a very calculated statesman who weighed his steps in the framework of implementing his agenda. His victory in the election, therefore, paves the way for Erdoğan to strengthen Turkey's Islamic identity, which is manifested in many

ways, including the construction of mosques and madrasas throughout Turkey; the introduction of religious content into studies, including the study of the Quran, the biography of the prophet Muhammad, and the Turkish-Ottoman heritage; the cancellation of the ban on entering universities in a hijab; the increase of alcohol prices; and more. There is also evidence from various sources indicating Erdoğan's establishment of a shadow army to defend his regime in the style of Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

It should also be noted that the victory of Erdoğan's AKP party in the parliamentary elections and the establishment of an alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) helps boost Erdoğan's policy. While opposition forces also entered the Parliament, Erdoğan's party and its allies still hold the majority.

Why is the opposition more militant and determined to fight Erdoğan's regime?

For a simple reason - the fear that Turkey is on its way to becoming an enduring dictatorship, manifested for over a decade in the suppression of freedom of expression and the restriction on opposition voices seeking to be heard. In this context, it is worth noting the "Ergenekon" affair, which began in 2007 with the arrests of hundreds of military officials and intellectuals accused of conspiring against the Turkish regime. Most memorable, however, was the failed military coup against the regime in 2016, which provided Erdoğan with a pretext to apply emergency laws in the country, allowing him to send over 8,000 troops and 150,000 civilians to jail, and to dismiss approximately 110,000 public employees. Erdoğan's victory in the current elections heralds the waning power and, to a large extent, even the "death sentence" of the opposition forces.

Why did Erdoğan move up the elections in Turkey, which were only supposed to take place in a year and a half? Several key factors can be identified:

- A. Erdoğan's fear that Turkey's difficult economic crisis (the value of the Turkish lira is down 17%; the unemployment rate is over 12%; the budget deficit is 7%) would severely undermine his popular support base and diminish his chances of winning the presidency.
- B. An attempt to ride the wave of public sympathy following the success of the Turkish army in conquering the Kurdish enclave in Afrin, Syria, as part of Operation Olive Branch.
- C. Erdoğan's fear of the voices of critics within his Justice and Development Party (AKP) who challenge his leadership due to his pursuit of a centralized government and a transition to a presidential regime. For

example, Abdullah Gül, a member of Erdoğan's party and the former Turkish Prime Minister, stands out as an adversary working to remove him.

Who are the forces that competed in the elections?

Three major blocs, including eight parties, ran in the current elections for the 600 seats in the Parliament (10% election threshold):

- A. The “People’s Alliance” - a coalition composed of three parties: the Justice and Development Party (AKP, Erdoğan's party); the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and the Great Unity Party (BBP).
- B. The “Nation Alliance” – a coalition composed of the opposition parties: the Republican People’s Party (CHP), the Good Party (IYI) and the Felicity Party (SP).
- C. The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which operates as an independent party and draws its power base from the Kurdish minority in the country.

Six candidates ran in the Turkish presidential elections:

- A. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the incumbent President of Turkey and a member of the AKP party.
- B. Muharrem Ince, a teacher by profession and the head of the CHP party, who stood out as Erdoğan’s most serious competitor.
- C. Selahattin Demirtas, a human rights lawyer of Kurdish origin who was sent to prison in 2016. The head of the HDP party. On June 20, 2018, the New York Times published a letter written by Demirtas from prison in which he accused Erdoğan of political persecution and suppressing individual freedom.
- D. Meral Aksener, a former member of the MHP party and the current head of the IYI party.
- E. Temel Karamollaoğlu, the head of the SP party.
- F. Doğu Perinçek, the head of the Patriotic Party.

Does Erdoğan’s victory in the presidential elections endanger Israel?

In my opinion, this question is mainly relevant as it concerns Europe and the United States. Erdoğan speaks out of both sides of his mouth. On the one hand, he wants to portray himself as a regime that shares common interests with the West, such as the war on terror, but at the same time he adopts a policy that is

opposite and even contrary to the West. For example, Turkey provides economic assistance to Iran despite the sanctions imposed on it by the United States as a result of the nuclear issue; it acquires missiles from Russia despite objection by the NATO alliance, of which Turkey is a member; it attacks Kurdish militias in northern Syria despite warnings by the United States; and more. However, the most significant threat is the refugee issue. Erdoğan often preaches that if the West acts against his regime, he will cease to serve as a gatekeeper between Turkey and Europe and allow the flow of refugees to the latter. In my opinion, Europe and the United States should worry more about Erdoğan's "zigzag" policy and his provocations in the West.

Regarding Israel, Erdoğan's hawkish attitudes toward Israel are well known in the Israeli public. What is concerning is that Erdoğan is now determined to increase his efforts to strengthen partnerships with various Islamic organizations around the world, such as the International Union of Muslim Scholars, headed by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, and the Palestinian Hamas movement, on everything related to the Palestinian issue and to strengthening Jerusalem's Islamic identity against the backdrop of the Israeli Embassy's move to Jerusalem. In my opinion, we will witness a worsening of Erdogan's attitude toward Israel in the near future, along with a clear and sympathetic tendency towards the Palestinian issue and an attempt to brand himself as a defender of Jerusalem. In addition, there will be a continued effort to deepen Turkey's military foothold in Africa and the Middle East, as it did with the establishment of military bases in Qatar, Somalia and North Sudan, and it is very likely that Turkey will establish a new military base in Djibouti in the near future. In other words, Turkey may also become a military threat, but this cannot be determined with certainty.

Erdoğan's election to the presidency of Turkey and the many powers that it grants him make him an almost omnipotent president who will continue to act unimpeded to promote his vision and aspiration to turn Turkey into a regional power with an Islamic identity. It was not in vain that he declared on the eve of the elections, "Give me another five years" and see what happens to Turkey.

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