



## COMMENTARIES

### **Turkey's Last Electoral Rite of Passage for a Post-Stress Democracy**

**ERTAN AYDIN**

### **Arab Reactions to Turkey's Regional Reengagement**

**MALIK MUFTI**

### **The New Era in Turkish Foreign Policy: Critiques and Challenges**

**MURAT YEŞİLTAŞ**

### **Turkey and the EU: Looking Beyond the Pessimisms**

**ERHAN İÇENER and DAVID PHINEMORE**

### **Why Did Iran Diplomacy Work this Time Around?**

**TRITA PARSİ**

### **The Crisis and Governance of Religious Pluralism in Europe**

**IAN MORRISON**

### **The Kurdistan Regional Government Elections: A Critical Evaluation**

**SARDAR AZİZ**

# Turkey's Last Electoral Rite of Passage for a Post-Stress Democracy

ERTAN AYDIN\*

**ABSTRACT** *Turkey's presidential election in August 2014 introduced the direct election of the president, ushering in a new era of Turkish democracy. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's election to the Turkish presidency signals the legitimization of the AK Party's democratic reforms over the previous twelve years. Turkish citizens' widespread participation in the election indicates a non-partisan acceptance of Turkey's democratic system, and its departure from the bureaucratic and military influence under the Kemalist system. Even the opposition parties have recognized this shift, adapting their political agendas and election strategies to appeal to the center. These developments have implications for the political future of Turkey, the Middle East, and the international community.*

**O**n August 10, 2014, for the first time, Turkish citizens went to ballot box to elect the President of Turkey. In this historic election, there were three candidates—Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, and Selahattin Demirtaş. Although all three candidates exhibited distinct political views, each presented an unprecedented centrist and consensus-seeking stance. This presidential election of 2014 contrasted with the 2007 election of President Abdullah Gül, who was elected by a majority vote in Parliament, as is the practice under the Turkish constitution. In that election, positions toward the Turkish presidency were highly polarized. The main opposi-

tion party, the Republican People's Party, and the Turkish military opposed Gül's election owing to his conservative ideology and his wife's public display of religion by wearing a Muslim headscarf. Consequently, the idea of electing Turkey's President by popular vote emerged in the spring of 2007, in response to the military general's threats of intervention and secularist parliamentarians' protest of the first lady's conservative clothing. The supporters of Turkey's old Jacobin political order argued for continued militant secularism and elitism, but they lost five consecutive elections from 2007 to 2014. As a result of their repeated electoral defeats, this style of elitism and militarist Ke-

\* Senior Adviser to Ahmet Davutoğlu, Prime Minister of Turkey

**Insight Turkey**  
Vol. 16 / No. 3 /  
2014, pp. 7-14

malism has lost its legitimacy and credibility in Turkish politics, forcing them now to adjust to Turkey's new pluralist democracy. Thus, the presidential election of August 2014 has legitimized a new Turkish political system characterized by a stable, pluralist democracy.

Turkish politics has undergone a gradual and peaceful evolution in the twelve years of the AK Party government, since November 2002. During this period, national, constitutional, and local elections have produced significant progress in eliminating the Jacobin legacy of Kemalism.<sup>1</sup> In 2007, this elitist ideology was still strong, mobilizing supporters against a woman's right to wear a headscarf, and camouflaging its agenda with slogans of freedom and democracy. The resounding victory by the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) in that election empowered Turkey's true democrats to undertake a movement for civil rights. Under this democratic movement, the Turkish government passed constitutional amendments granting individual rights and equality to Kurdish citizens, religious minorities, and women.<sup>2</sup> This wave of democratization initiated a robust, assertive form of democratic modernity, consistent with Muslim religious values, and it played a large role in the economic development of Anatolian towns and cities. The Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) revised their political agendas and mobilized reactionary resistance to this movement, but they again faced defeat in the following elections. Although



Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, chairman of Republican People's Party, visits Merzifon for Turkey's presidential elections.

AA / Erçin Top

the CHP still longed for the Jacobin democracy of Turkey's past, it recognized the need to adjust its program to remain relevant in Turkish politics. Thus, the CHP raised no serious objections to the launch of the Kurdish peace initiative and the constitution's recognition of women's freedom to wear religious attire in public.

In comparison to the outdated, polarized political atmosphere of the presidential election in 2007, the direct election method seems to have initiated a degree of harmony. In the 2014 presidential election, all three candidates appealed to the center of Turkish political values, with the hope of attracting the majority's votes. No candidate spoke against the freedom of religious clothing or the political

rights of Kurdish citizens.<sup>3</sup> The direct election method exposed extremist politicians to the will of the majority, and thus forced reactionary views

**The direct election method exposed extremist politicians to the will of the majority, and thus forced reactionary views out of mainstream politics**

out of mainstream politics.<sup>4</sup> Under this new political environment, neither of the main opposition parties, the CHP nor the MHP, nominated a candidate from their own party leadership, and instead selected a conservative intellectual as their common candidate. The CHP and MHP leaders seemed to recognize that their political visions would not win the approval of the Turkish majority, and they agreed on the nomination of Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, former OIC Secretary General and a History of Science professor. İhsanoğlu's father emigrated from Turkey to Egypt in the early Republican period, in protest against Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's radical secularist policies. Thus, İhsanoğlu grew up in Egypt, studied at Al-Ayn Shams University and al-Azhar University, and arrived in Turkey in the mid-1970s. In the presidential election of 2007, the CHP would have labeled İhsanoğlu a reac-

tionary Islamist candidate if he were nominated. Yet, seven years later, in a marked change of political strategy, Turkey's two main opposition parties agreed on this very candidate, who represents a certain religious critique of Kemalism and holds Turkey's Islamic affiliations. As such, İhsanoğlu ran on a platform emulating the AK Party's centrist stance. In support of the Kurdish political movement, the third candidate, Selahattin Demirtaş, similarly promoted centrist political ideas, embracing the Turkish identity and mainstream liberal ideals. Under this strategy, Demirtaş attracted votes from outside the Kurdish ethnic base, and he doubled the number of votes his party received in the local elections. Thus, all three presidential candidates symbolize consensus over dissension, as they demonstrated similar political values in support of basic rights and liberties.

In view of their platforms' similarity, it is worth examining the reasons for Tayyip Erdoğan's victory against a coalition of more than 10 opposition parties of various sizes, which openly supported CHP-MHP candidate At a basic level, the majority of the Turkish electorate looked beyond these shared political values and sought evidence of leadership ability. Opinion polls<sup>5</sup> have indicated the voters' desire for a strong leader, who will lead Turkey away from crisis and towards a more mature democracy. Erdoğan has proven himself to be such a leader to his supporters, as he guided Turkish democracy through the many trials of the last twelve years. Many citizens believe that he is capable of achiev-

## Narrow-minded, provincial nationalism contradicts the humanitarian concerns of Erdoğan supporters, who emphasize the moral responsibility of providing aid to war refugees

ing a peaceful, prosperous Turkish democracy, despite constitutional challenges. In particular, the recent difficulties posed by the bureaucrats in the judiciary and security establishment, who claimed to be associated with the Gülen Movement. On top of his impressive leadership qualities, perceived by his supporters, Erdoğan has proved his political will and commitment to the facilitation of Turkey's gradual democratic revolution.<sup>6</sup> Over the past twelve years of Erdoğan's premiership, the average Turkish citizen's freedom and quality of life improved, exceeding the expectations of the most optimistic citizens.<sup>7</sup>

The Western media and Turkey's pro-Western elite have widely criticized Erdoğan's political rhetoric and administrative methods. However, they have frequently overlooked Erdoğan's extraordinary transformation of Turkey's economy and civil society.<sup>8</sup> For example, during the 2014 Bayram holiday, Turkish citizens reported vast improvements in transportation since 2002, due to the AK Party government's tripling the number of Turkish highways. Many claimed to

have been able to reach their holiday destination in half the time the same trip took twelve years earlier. In addition, citizens today spend considerably less money on healthcare and prescriptions compared to ten years ago, and they benefit from a comprehensive national health care system. The international media seizes upon and sensationalizes certain polemic and sometimes provocative expressions in Erdoğan's speeches, and criticizes him for straying from the pro-Western model expected of him. Yet, millions of people across Turkey have witnessed the government's generous investments in their neighborhoods, and they have benefitted from increased social welfare support for education and medical care. They have seen a general improvement in the quality of their lives, and an expansion of their rights and freedoms. They recognize in Erdoğan the leader who ended the era of military intervention in democratic politics, who found a political solution for decades of separatist Kurdish violence, and who elevated Turkey's international standing by revitalizing its economy and diplomatic posture.

In opinion polls,<sup>9</sup> citizens affiliated with other parties have also expressed their recognition of Erdoğan's achievements, indicating support for Erdoğan beyond the AK Party. Even the opposition parties' critique of Erdoğan implicitly acknowledges his success. Instead of complaining about poverty and lacking social services, they claim that Turkey is experiencing an economic bubble, as a result of excessive credit card debt,

and that Turkey's prosperity is unsustainable in the long term. They accuse the AK Party of granting social welfare to poor people as a method of deception. Even this criticism acknowledges the extensive social welfare benefits available to the poor, including free health care and financial subsidies for the handicapped, the elderly, and single women. In addition, critics describe Erdoğan's Middle Eastern foreign policy as too active and involved, citing his acceptance of millions of Syrian refugees into Turkey and his allocation of Turkish funds for them. This critique reflects the ideas of the CHP and MHP leaders, and reveals an isolationist, and at times xenophobic attitude towards the Arab Middle East. This narrow-minded, provincial nationalism contradicts the humanitarian concerns of Erdoğan supporters, who emphasize the moral responsibility of providing aid to war refugees.<sup>10</sup> Even this criticism of Erdoğan's diplomatic activism and humanitarian concern of the problems in the Middle East illustrates a new recognition of the Turkish state's power and agency. Until recently, all the developments in the region had been attributed to American and European meddling, and not to the Turkish government.

The main shortcoming of the İhsanoğlu and Demirtaş campaigns, however, resided in their failure to convince the electorate of their ability to do a better job than Erdoğan in solving the constitutional challenges facing Turkey. Both candidates evaded the big questions. Most noteworthy, they did not address the illegal activities of the

bureaucrats, who claimed to be affiliated to the Gülen Movement in the Turkish judiciary and police force and portrayed "as a parallel state" by the media. In fact, CHP leaders even collaborated with the Gülenist groups, publicizing their illegal wiretapping of AK Party politicians and average citizens. In the public eye, İhsanoğlu's dismissal of this major social and political issue as "unimportant" weakened public confidence in his ability to be effective in the highest political office of the Turkish Republic. The many opposition parties that collectively nominated İhsanoğlu for office shared this central problem: they expressed no clear, distinct ideas about the problems facing Turkey, instead they concentrated on tautological and self-referential criticisms of Erdoğan.

With its democratic improvements, the direct presidential election boosted the legitimacy of the Turkish political system, despite a polarized public opinion. The participation rate of just over 70 percent was very high by European standards, although lower than the local elections. Election participation was higher in regions where opposition parties have been stronger, exhibiting opposition voters' eagerness to change national leadership at the ballot box. The unprecedented success of the Kurdish political party candidate, Selahattin Demirtaş, who received almost 10 percent of the vote, confirmed the Kurdish party's trust in the Turkish system of democracy in order to achieve their political goals. This success has helped to transform the Kurdish political movement among Turkish public opinion, which



Electoral officers checking the signet at a polling station.

AA / Bilgin S. Şaşmaz

is now more likely to see the Kurds as legitimate political actors rather than as representatives of a separatist terror organization. This election was conducted with professional efficiency and transparency, and with the public's full confidence in its fairness and results. Overall, the presidential election of 2014 symbolized a return to normalcy in Turkish democratic politics, following the previous political turmoil of the Gezi Protests and Gülenist Coup attempts of the previous year. The democratic strength of the Turkish electoral system helped restore legitimacy to the political system in the aftermath of these crises.

The overwhelming support for Erdoğan in the first round of the presidential election illustrated the public's confidence that he can lead the Turkish Republic to overcome the final unconstitutional challenges to its civil political system, while fostering an economically prosperous Muslim

democracy with ties to the European Union. In this context, Erdoğan's presidency will ensure the growth of an uninhibited civilian democracy in Turkey. Erdoğan has institutionalized a party culture of diversity and inclusion, without the domination of a single clique or ideology, and this legacy will continue under the leadership of Ahmet Davutoğlu, as the new AK Party chairman and prime minister. Moreover, the AK Party rule for senior parliamentarians' retirement after three terms allows a new generation of young, dynamic politicians to revitalize and reform the party in keeping with the evolution of Turkish society.

The presidential and local elections in 2014, on March 30 and August 10, have reaffirmed the Turkish model of democracy. These elections hold a significant role in world politics, beyond the protection of Turkish citizens' safety and prosperity. Many writers

have discussed Turkey as a model for the Middle East and broader Muslim communities involved in the Arab Spring. However, as the Arab Spring quickly transformed into an Arab Winter, following the Egyptian military coup, discussions of the Turkish model faded away, exacerbated by the political chaos of Iraq, Syria, and even its own Gezi protests. Yet, the Turkish government never sought to export its political model to other countries. Turkey's leaders are aware that each political system, including their own, faces its own idiosyncrasies and challenges. Still, the attention to the Turkish model emphasizes the strengths of fair elections and a sound democratic system. The Turkish political community is composed of many ethnic, social, and political groups, promoting competing national visions and political ideologies. Despite these divisions, Turkey has remained a peaceful and stable country, as a result of the public consensus for a democratic electoral system and constitutionally ensured rights and liberties. This political system grants citizens the freedom to articulate their opinions and allows democratic politics to mediate differences in political ideologies and interests. Under this system, the two main opposition parties recognized their electoral weakness, but merged together to nominate a single presidential candidate, instead of relinquishing their presidential bids. Turkish voters have always made their choices from a wide spectrum of political ideas, and even if their preferred candidate loses an election, they recognize that they will be able to express their political will in upcoming elections. Cit-

**There is now a growing and articulate set of demands from various Alevi citizens and civil society organizations, which need to be addressed through a political process**

izens trust Turkey's pluralist democracy and the constitutional reforms strengthening their personal liberties. Moreover, this model offers an example of a healthy political system for countries throughout the Middle East. This reality should inspire the Erdoğan Presidency to play a greater international role and to contribute to regional peace and prosperity over the next five years.

Turkish politics will continue to deal with its main challenges. The new AK Party government needs to navigate the Kurdish peace process with diligence and balance. There is now a growing and articulate set of demands from various Alevi citizens and civil society organizations, which need to be addressed through a political process. As the situation in the Middle East, especially among Turkey's neighbors, dramatically worsened in the last couple of years, Turkish foreign policy needs to be more comprehensive and provide the attention to the Middle East it requires, without losing sight of Turkey's grand strategy in becoming a full member of the European Union. The new government must continue and institutionalize its zero-tolerance policy to-

wards examples of bureaucratic corruption. Meanwhile, Turkey needs to maintain its political stability and domestic peace in order to sustain its economic growth, which is tied to Turkey's deep integration to the fluctuations and vagaries of the global markets. Yet, the completion of a pluralist democratic consolidation and a post-stress normal electoral democracy will enable the new government to handle these challenges.

In summary, the presidential election of 2014 signifies a consolidation of democracy in Turkish politics. Turkish citizens demonstrated their opposition to anti-democratic manipulations of the political system, signaling an end to the era of military and bureaucratic interventions in state affairs. The future of Turkish democracy requires a reconsideration of the previous model of Turkish politics, made up of a Kemalist center and a conservative periphery. The developments in Turkish politics from 2002 to 2014 have resulted in a confident Turkish democratic system—a system that should inspire new approaches to bridging the gap between Muslim cultures and the political demands of global modernity. ■

## Endnotes

1. For the roots of this Jacobin legacy, see Ertan Aydın, "Peculiarities of Turkish Revolutionary Ideology in the 1930s: The Ülkü Version of Kemalism, 1933-1936," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 5 (2004), pp. 55-82 and Yılmaz Çolak, "Nationalism and State in Turkey: Drawing the Boundaries of 'Turkish Culture' in the 1930s," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Vol. 3 (2003), pp. 2-20; for its influence on contemporary Turkish politics, Yılmaz Çolak, *Türkiye'de Devlet ve Kültürel Çeşitlilik*, (Ankara: Kadim, 2010).
2. For a concise evaluation of these democratizing reforms see William Hale and Ergun Özbudun, *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism in Turkey: The Case of the AKP*, (London: Routledge: 2010).
3. For a detailed account of the speeches of presidential candidates see <http://www.rte.com.tr/tr/vizyon-belgesi>, <http://ihsanoglu.com/vizyon/>, and <http://www.selahattindemirtas.net/yeniyasam/>
4. For the accountability through election and its moderating influence, see Guillermo A. O'Donnell, "Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 9, No. 3, (1998) pp. 112-126.
5. A joint study of remarkable polling companies of Turkey, ANAR, Denge, Genar and Pollmark showed the leadership effect in the presidential elections. This research was done between 5-11 June 2014, face to face with 29 154 respondents in 12 regions at the national scale. See <http://www.yenisafak.com.tr/yazarlar/AbdulkadirSelvi/basbakanin-masasindaki-anket/54842>
6. Ertan Aydın, "Turkey's Gradual Revolution," *Project Syndicate*, October 23, 2013. <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/ertan-aydinon-the-advantages-of-recep-tayyip-erdogan-s-cautious-consensus-based-reforms>
7. On Erdoğan's way of politics, see Metin Heper, "Islam, Conservatism, and Democracy in Turkey: Comparing Turgut Özal ve Recep Tayyip Erdoğan," *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2013), pp. 141-156 and Ertan Aydın, "Erdoğan Tarzı Siyaset," *Star daily newspaper, Açık Görüş*, June 28, 2011.
8. For the critique of the neo-orientalist media coverage on Turkey, see Ertan Aydın, "Talking Turkey: Orientalism Strikes Back," *Aljazeera*, December 11, 2013: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/12/talking-turkey-orientalism-strikes-back-2013128105529522711.html> and İbrahim Kalın, "Neo-Orientalism with a Thousand Faces," *Daily Sabah*, August 23, 2014: <http://www.dailysabah.com/columns/ibrahim-kalin/2014/08/19/neoorientalism-with-a-thousand-faces>
9. See the interview with İbrahim Dalış, Director of Pollmark Research Company, in *Daily Sabah*, August 4, 2014: <http://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2014/08/04/erdogan-will-be-elected-president-after-the-first-round-of-elections>
10. For a detailed amount of aid to Syrian refugees by the Republic of Turkey, Prime Ministry Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency, see <https://www.afad.gov.tr/TR/IcerikDetay1.aspx?ID=16&lcerikID=747>