

Turkish elections: Why the EU may come to regret its support for Erdoğan

Turkey held national elections on 1 November, with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) founded by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan managing to regain the absolute majority in parliament that it had lost in elections in June. [Ranj Alaaldin](#) writes that while Erdoğan has successfully reasserted his control over Turkish politics, the tactics he adopted following the June elections are likely to have lasting consequences for relations between the Turkish state and its Kurdish population. He also argues that the EU's attempts to secure a deal with Turkey on the refugee crisis effectively bolstered Erdoğan in the run up to the elections, with any opportunity to exert pressure on Turkey at a time of weakness likely to be lost now that the AKP has regained its majority.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his party regained their majority in the country's national elections, having lost it back in June. But Erdoğan's victory and that of his party, the [Justice and Development Party](#) (AKP), comes at a price. It does not bode well for the future of Turkey, stability in the region and the international community's efforts to win the war on ISIS and solve the refugee crisis.

Speaking after his party's victory was secured, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu spoke of unity and a victory for the Turkish people. However, his comments are too little, too late, and were made as though the past-five months of bombings in Turkey, airstrikes on the [Kurdistan Workers' Party](#) (PKK), mob attacks on Kurds and the loss of hundreds of lives had not happened.

Like all dangerous populists, Erdoğan has created a climate of fear and uncertainty over the past five-months; rather than reconciling with his rivals, he has pushed an 'us vs them' framework that has clearly paid dividends – after months of bombings, violence and divisive rhetoric, Erdoğan got what he wanted. But his short-term gains and tactics have long-term costs.

Turkey is now more divided than it has ever been. The prospects of peace being reached with the PKK, which has fought the state for equal treatment and a combination of human, political and territorial rights for Turkey's beleaguered 15-20 million Kurds, all but disappeared when Erdoğan initiated his campaign of divide and rule back in June and renewed conflict with the PKK, which he targeted with airstrikes as soon as he lost his majority.

Turkey is also witnessing levels of violence that have not been seen for decades. Recent attacks on civilians are unprecedented in terms of their magnitude and frequency. Erdoğan has effectively set peace with the Kurds back decades, while also fomenting other conflicts on Turkish soil, such as that between pro-government Islamists groups – that have functioned as Erdoğan's proxies in the past – and the Kurds.

The West should have pressured Erdoğan to seek a path of reconciliation rather than war, at a time when he was most vulnerable; to pursue peace with the PKK and find ways to work with its sister-group in Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is now the de-facto government of Syria's Kurdistan region. Instead, the EU appeased and bolstered Erdoğan in the run-up to the elections, with the aim of securing a deal with Ankara on the refugee crisis.

It may now regret that. Erdoğan is not only likely to drive a hard bargain; he may also walk away. He has never cared much for the EU and has only sought engagement with the West when under pressure at home, as he has been in the past few months.

In the absence of any external pressure, Erdoğan is also likely to continue his suppression of the media, and will make sure critical outlets and journalists are silenced. Just a day after the election the Turkish authorities raided a weekly magazine and charged it with ‘insulting’ the President. The rule of law will further suffer now that Erdoğan has his majority. All in all, Turkey will continue to resemble its autocratic neighbours and that should worry the region and the broader international community.

Erdoğan’s victory also means that he is likely to continue to prioritise the end of the Assad regime ahead of a war on ISIS. It also means that he will continue to target the Kurds in both Turkey and Syria, creating complications for the West’s campaign against ISIS, since both the PKK and PYD are crucial allies of the West that have won countless battle-field victories against the jihadists.

Turkey is not an indispensable ally and should not be considered as such. Unless the West starts to seriously exert pressure, Erdoğan will have little incentive to cease his unhelpful policies. This includes backing hardline Islamist groups and acquiescing to jihadist groups entering Syria via Turkey, as well as their use of Turkey as a transit point through which to smuggle arms and funds into Syria. Turkey has also acquiesced to a thriving black market on its territory, through which ISIS has been able to continue its operations in both Iraq and Syria.

Erdoğan should learn not just from his predecessors but also from Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship, which destroyed Kurdish villages, used chemical weapons and committed genocide against Iraq’s Kurds and still failed to end Kurdish resistance to the regime. Isolating the PKK and PYD is a futile tactic. They are now both backed by regional and world powers like Russia and the US.



Just as it has done with Iraq’s Kurds, Turkey under Erdoğan must find ways to work with the PYD and, domestically, return back to the 2013 peace deal with the PKK and work with the pro-Kurdish party, the [People’s Democratic Party](#) (HDP). That may potentially restore some goodwill and send a message to Turkey’s Kurdish movement that peaceful engagement is still a plausible option, although Erdoğan’s actions to date make this an implausible, if not counter-intuitive option.

Kurdish nationalism is a more powerful force than it has ever been. Unlike Turkey, the PKK and PYD are gradually becoming indispensable allies. This is likely to remain so, given western disengagement in recent years and since the West is unlikely to deploy its own troops in the foreseeable future. Turkey, on the other hand, is losing friends internationally and has never been so vulnerable – but that does not mean Erdoğan will change his ways.

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