

Erdoğan is in the process of establishing a presidential political system in Turkey based on Islamic rather than secular principles

blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/08/18/erdogans-election-victory-is-the-first-step-toward-turkey-establishing-a-new-presidential-political-system-based-on-islamic-rather-than-secular-principles/

18/08/2014

On 10 August, Turkey's Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, won the country's presidential election, becoming the first directly elected President in Turkey's history. [Soli Özel](#) assesses Erdoğan's victory and what it means for the country's future. He writes that the result is a step toward the creation of a new presidential political system within Turkey, but that this will depend on whether Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party can secure the parliamentary majority required to amend the country's constitution.



Last week, the Turkish electorate gave Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan a landslide victory in the first round of a two-round election and made him the first popularly elected President of the Turkish Republic. Mr. Erdogan received 51.8 per cent of the vote. The main contenders, Professor Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, a former secretary general of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and Selahattin Demirtaş, the candidate of the pro-Kurdish [Peoples' Democratic Party](#) (HDP), received 38.4 and 9.8 per cent of the vote respectively. The participation rate of 74 per cent was the lowest in Turkey for any election since 1977.

Professor İhsanoğlu was the joint candidate (a most ill-fated decision) of the would be social democratic [People's Republican Party](#) (CHP) and the ultranationalist [Nationalist Movement Party](#) (MHP). In the event neither party really worked hard for their joint candidate and thereby prepared the ground for yet another humiliating defeat. They scored less than the combined 43 per cent they received in the municipal elections of March 30, 2014.

Mr. Demirtaş, formerly a co-chairperson of the Kurdish nationalist Peace and Democracy Party (BDP that transformed itself to People's Democratic Party HDP) was considered another winner of the election. His campaign themes went beyond the specifically Kurdish agenda and called for a more just, free and democratic Turkey. This stance enabled him to get a more than 50 per cent boost from the municipal elections and placed him in the Turkish political landscape as a young, energetic, humorous (a rare attribute in Turkish politics) and attractive candidate who can reach out to constituencies beyond nationalist Kurds.

However big Erdoğan's victory may have been, it was also tainted by the general unfairness of the conditions for the elections. The Prime Minister has exploited to the full the advantages of his office and travelled widely around the country using state resources, enjoying full coverage from a largely subservient broadcast media, a large segment of which is positively partisan and operates broadly as a mouthpiece for the government. The media in general and the public stations in particular gave scandalously unequal coverage to the candidates.

The public had no chance to listen to a debate between the candidates to understand what their platforms were, since the Prime Minister refused to appear with the others in front of national audiences. He preferred to speak to journalists who would not dare ask him challenging questions or raise objections when he used discriminatory language. The financing of the campaign was less than transparent. Many business people had good reason to fear retaliation if their support went to the wrong candidate openly. In the event the Prime Minister's campaign raised 8 times more money than Professor İhsanoğlu's, whose supporting parties showed no effort to mobilise their support bases and collect donations, and 59 times more than the imaginative Demirtaş campaign.

To beef up the atmosphere of intimidation that already dominated the country, the long-awaited prosecution and persecution of the Gülen movement's cadres in the police and the judiciary were launched just two weeks before the election. Finally and inadvertently, Israel's Gaza campaign and the images of dead children and unspeakable

devastation also played into the hands of the Prime Minister who took a very harsh position against Israel and the United States.

The meaning of the Erdoğan Presidency

With this victory Mr. Erdoğan won his ninth consecutive political contest: Three national elections, three national local elections and three referenda. He is undoubtedly the most popular, skillful and successful politician in the country. The bond he has built as a populist leader with his electorate appears unshakable even despite serious allegations of corruption, scant regard for fundamental freedoms and a penchant for harsh and authoritarian demeanour.

The presidential election brought Mr. Erdoğan and his colleagues closer to their goal of redesigning the Turkish Republic. For some time now Erdoğan has made public his desire to transform Turkey's political system from a parliamentary to a presidential one without necessarily having to bother with the complexities of checks and balances. True to form, as a populist leader he believes that he is the incarnation of the "national will". Therefore the subtleties of liberal institutionalism are of little importance for him. As he has shown last year during the massive demonstrations of June 2013, any and all opposition to his will is considered a betrayal, if not part of a vast global conspiracy to unseat him and thereby weaken Turkey.

Power had already been monopolised in Mr. Erdoğan's hands through the succession of electoral victories and administrative changes after 11 years of rule under his increasing domination. By now, there is no one in the Party that can challenge his authority. The state apparatus, and particularly the judiciary, has by and large been cowed into submission after his counterattack in the wake of corruption charges against his associates and family members.

A good demonstration of his might was the decision by the party executive that the convention to elect Erdoğan's successor would be held on August 27, a day before he is inaugurated. This was an effective way of blocking the ascendance of the current President Abdullah Gül where he could be an effective counterweight to Erdoğan. As things stand Mr. Erdoğan will appoint a submissive Prime Minister and seek to win a major victory in the upcoming general elections (scheduled for June 2015 but likely to be held earlier) so that he can command the necessary majority in Parliament to change the constitution in favour of a Presidential system.

An Erdoğan Presidency, with or without the Presidential system, will likely change the course of Turkey's politics. The Presidency will become the seat of executive power. As ineffective as the opposition currently is, they will not be in a position to block Erdoğan or force him to change course or even modify his plans. The new Turkish Republic, what the Erdoğan camp prefers to call the "New Turkey" will arguably be more authoritarian, although the military, long the bastion of authoritarianism and tutelage, has long been subdued. The political project of the new rulers, or the builders of the new Republic, will try to reverse to the extent possible the secularising course that the original founders established.

The new authoritarianism will have an Islamic lexicon and it will try to redefine the institutions and the *Weltanschauung* of the regime based on Islamic rather than secular principles. Nonetheless, Erdoğan's new regime may well be able to resolve Turkey's perennial Kurdish problem and remove one of the causes of authoritarianism in the Republican order. Yet, Turkey is also a religiously pluralistic country where the population includes a significant segment of secularly oriented, well-educated and skilled citizens. Therefore the consolidation of the majoritarian order and the imposition of its values will not go unchallenged.

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