

Devastating defeat for established parties in Turkish elections

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On November 3 voters delivered a devastating rebuff to all the parties that have dominated Turkish politics for the past two decades. None of the parties in the previous governing coalition cleared the 10 percent vote needed to secure parliamentary representation. The opposition Party of the Right Path (DYP), led by the former head of government, Tansu Ciller, also failed to get into parliament.

The most devastating result was recorded by the Democratic Left (DSP), led by the former prime minister Bülent Ecevit. Three years ago the party won 22 percent of the vote. In the elections last Sunday this figure plummeted to just one percent. The two other parties involved in the previous ruling coalition also suffered massive losses. The fascist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP—Grey Wolves), led by Devlet Bahçeli, declined from 18 percent to 8 percent and the Motherland Party (ANAP) of Mesut Yılmaz fell from 13 to a mere 5 percent.

The election result is an expression of the growing anger and discontent on the part of substantial layers of the population in relation to the country's corrupt political elite. Turkey has experienced a worsening economic crisis over the past 18 months. Two million workers have lost their jobs and the value of the Turkish currency, the lira, has halved against the US dollar. It is above all lower and middle-income workers and their families who have shouldered the brunt of unemployment and inflation.

Widespread social discontent has resulted in an electoral victory for the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (AKP), which will occupy nearly two-thirds of the 550 seats in the Turkish parliament. The party will play the leading role in the new parliament although it won just 35 percent of the vote. Its absolute parliamentary majority is a result of the failure of most of the other parties to cross the 10 percent hurdle.

The only other party to join the AKP in parliament is the Republican People's Party (CHP), led by Deniz Baykal. It received 20 percent of votes. It had no representation in the previous parliament and, in common with Ecevit's DSP, stands in the secular nationalist tradition of Kemalism. The party's most prominent figure is the current economics minister and former vice chairman of the World Bank, Kemal Dervis, who switched to the CHP shortly before the elections.

Dervis had organised a \$16 billion credit from the IMF last year in order to prevent a complete collapse of the Turkish economy. His trump cards are his good connections to the United States, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The CHP draws

its main support from better-off city layers and the military. Only recently there were rumours that the former head of the Turkish military general staff, Hüseyin Kivrikoglu, was contemplating joining the party. The rumour was denied, but remained a significant signal nevertheless.

Support for the AKP came primarily from poor layers of the population in the big cities and the countryside of Anatolia. The Istanbul newspaper *Sabah* described the AKP victory as a "revolution by impoverished Anatolia against the old political guard". Denunciations of widespread corruption and social misery lay at the heart of the AKP's election propaganda.

The party's leader, 48-year-old Recep Tayyip Erdogan, grew up in a poor district of Istanbul and won popularity in the 1990s after becoming mayor of the Turkish city on the Bosphorus Straits. In his youth Erdogan was a militant supporter of Islamism, but more recently has sought to put across a more moderate image—stressing that his party will not challenge the secular Turkish constitution nor Turkey's alliance with the US. Erdogan has also maintained that his party will continue Turkey's efforts to enter the European Union.

The AKP was founded just a few months ago. Following a state ban of the Islamist Virtue Party, Erdogan broke with the veteran Islamist leader Necmettin Erbakan and founded his own more moderate party. The judiciary has ensured, however, that he cannot take up the post of head of government. Four years ago Erdogan was prosecuted for inciting popular unrest—he had recited a poem containing the line "the minarets are our bayonets"—and as a result was unable to stand as a parliamentary candidate. In addition, shortly before the election Turkey's constitutional court began proceedings for a possible ban of the AKP—a threat which still hangs over the party.

The rapid climb to power by the AKP is largely the result of the political bankruptcy of Turkey's traditional left-wing parties. Nominally social democratic, the DSP lost its last vestiges of credibility after forming a coalition with the neo-liberal ANAP and the fascist MHP. Ecevit, the DSP's 77-year-old head, could only offer IMF-dictated austerity measures wrapped up in rabid chauvinism—above all on the issue of Cyprus.

This made it possible for the AKP to pose as the advocate of the poor and oppressed. In the course of the election campaign the AKP demanded that new terms be worked out with the IMF for the repayment of Turkish debt, thus enabling more generous subsidies to peasant farmers, better terms for employees and more time for

regional firms to put their own bids in for state enterprises facing privatisation. Social institutions organised by the Islamists in deprived areas helped the party acquire the reputation of an organisation that supports the needy.

The AKP was also able to profit from widespread opposition to a war with Iraq. The overwhelming majority of the population is against a US-led war with their neighbour. Erdogan appealed to antiwar sentiments in his election campaign by declaring, “We want no shedding of blood, tears and death.”

Apart from these remarks, the AKP—in common with all other Turkish parties—has refrained from taking any concrete stand. None of the parties are willing to confront the Turkish military, which dominates the country’s powerful National Security Council. They are aware that any clear stance on the issue of an Iraq war would jeopardise relations with the US, which Turkey depends on militarily and economically.

Prior to the election the foreign policy and economic spokesman for the AKP, Murat Mercan, told the German newspaper *taz*, “These decisions have been taken some time ago in the National Security Council and we will just put our signature to them.” Erdogan himself has declared his opposition to unilateral action by the US, but stressed at the same time that Turkey would respect a war resolution concluded by the United Nations.

On their web site, the AKP declares its support for the “US led war against terrorism”: “Our party will give priority to establish a necessary international basis against terrorism and the cooperation of Turkey in this struggle. We will continue our longstanding defence collaboration with USA and spread this relationship to the economy, investment, science and technology.”

The two men who are regarded as the most likely candidates for the post of prime minister also enjoy good relations with the US. Abdullah Gül studied economics in London and Istanbul, speaks English fluently and in July this year was one of the two dozen guests who invited US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz to dinner in the course of his trip to Ankara. The other main candidate, political scientist Vecdi Gönül, completed his masters degree at a California university.

Immediately after the election Erdogan sought to dispel any fear within domestic and foreign business circles that the AKP could depart from Turkey’s pro-Western course or attempt to put into practice its election pledge to improve the lot of the poor. He promised to continue the stability programme agreed by the previous government with the IMF, to open up the country to foreign investment and continue Turkey’s pro-EU course. The Istanbul stock market subsequently rose by 7.2 points within the space of a few hours.

Erdogan also sought to appease the military by including in his first public speech several quotations by the founder of the modern Turkish state, Kemal Atatürk. He promised that events such as those that led to the dismissal of the Islamist government led by Necmettin Erbakan would not take place. After taking office in 1996, Erbakan made his first priority trips to Iran and Libya and was driven out of power by the military a year later.

In the past the Turkish military has repeatedly banned influential Islamist parties. In January 1998 the Welfare Party was banned and most recently, in June 2001, the Virtue Party. Should they

attempt to do the same with the AKP then the move would amount to re-establishing a military dictatorship. Observers fear that in such circumstances Turkey could be plunged into chaos similar to the fate that befell Algeria, where the repression of Islamists after their electoral victory unleashed a civil war.

European governments have adopted a wait-and-see attitude following the victory of the AKP. In 1999 the EU awarded Turkey the status of potential candidate for the organisation in the hope that this would strengthen the country’s pro-Western course. In this respect the success of the Islamists is seen as a setback, but Erdogan has at least made clear he will continue with Turkish advances towards the EU.

On Tuesday, Erdogan met before the press with Deniz Baykal, the leader of the only opposition party in parliament, the CHP, to jointly campaign for entry to the EU. He also made a surprise proposal for a resolution of the conflict over Cyprus—an issue which stands in the way of closer relations with the EU. Erdogan advocated a solution along the lines of the Belgium model, i.e., the division of the island into Turkish and Greek halves based on a central administration with broad autonomy for the various nationalities.

Entry to the EU is widely supported by the Turkish population. According to opinion polls 70 percent approve, but their support is based on largely illusory expectations. Most hope for more wealth, democracy and liberty. They are unprepared for the rigorous economic measures demanded by the EU as a precondition for membership.

When one compares the hopes and expectations which Erdogan and the AKP encouraged in their election campaign with the party’s rapid adoption, after the election, of the course advocated by the IMF, the US and the EU, then it is evident that this election victory is only a temporary stage in the continuing political and economic crisis in Turkey. The anger and discontent which swept aside the Turkish political establishment will inevitably backfire on the AKP.



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