

Turkey: Victory for the AKP in local elections masks social tensions

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The moderate Islamic AKP (Party of Justice and Development) led by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayip Erdogan emerged the winner of local elections in Turkey on March 28. The traditional parties of the Turkish establishment lost further ground and left-wing and Kurdish parties are hit by a particularly deep crisis.

With almost 43 percent of votes across the country, the ruling AKP increased the 34 percent it won in the 2002 national parliamentary elections by an extra 9 percent. The only opposition party with representation in Parliament, the left-wing Kemalist CHP (Republican Peoples Party), gained just 18 percent—a loss of 2 percent compared with the national elections of 2002.

In the event, the CHP was only able to maintain a degree of support in the wealthier provincial regions on the Turkish west coast. Among the four major cities the party was only able to win Izmir, with the AKP winning a majority in the cities of Istanbul, Adana and the Turkish capital, Ankara. The AKP also took the tourist centre Antalya, where the head of the CHP, Deniz Baykal, was the party's candidate.

The AKP had gone to some lengths to present itself as moderate and statesmanlike. In the main the party's candidates sought to avoid any confrontations with the Kemalist establishment, although according to some estimates two-thirds of them come from the ranks of the fundamentalist Milli Görüs (National View). A number of candidates made a point of publicly shaving off their Islamic beards.

The main reason for the success of the AKP is public identification of the party with economic recovery and furthering democratic renewal of the country. In 2001, Turkey went through a devastating financial crisis that wiped out many working and middle class incomes. Since then the situation has largely stabilised. The economy has grown and there has been a marked decline in the rate of inflation. Ordinary people associated such developments with Erdogan's party, although there has been little real improvement in their lives.

Following the financial crisis the International Monetary

Fund imposed a “reform programme” on Turkey, which only served to worsen widespread poverty and already high levels of unemployment. Contrary to its election promises, when it spoke of standing up to the IMF, since taking over government the AKP has in fact pursued and implemented barely unchanged the IMF programme of privatisation, deregulation, price and tax increases for consumers and cuts in grants for small farmers.

At the same time the party has pursued a certain degree of liberalisation, such as increasing penalties for torture, rescinding the death penalty and granting permission for the setting up of Kurdish private schools. The practical consequences have been more of a symbolic nature; nevertheless they have served to encourage popular hopes for further democratisation of the country and its economy in the run-up to possible membership of the European Union.

Nevertheless, the relative recovery in the economy is far from stable. Not least among the reasons for the recovery has been the fact that the IMF and World Bank have supplied Turkey with millions in the form of credits. The US played a leading role in securing these credits to ensure that this strategically positioned country holds on to some sort of stability and retains ties to the west. As a result, high stock market levels determine economic stability, but the close interconnection of the two factors means that political events could rapidly undermine the situation.

There are sufficient weak points. While Erdogan uses every opportunity to curry favour with the US, the popularity of his party is widely bound up with the fact that deputies had voted against allowing permission for the US to use the country as a base for its war against Iraq. The US response was hysterical abuse of Turkey in the American press and a public appeal by deputy US Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz to the Turkish military.

The Turkish foreign minister, Abdullah Gü'l, has reacted to the latest fighting in Iraq by declaring that any dispatch of Turkish troops was “out of the question.” But also out of the question is that the U.S. is prepared to accept such a position in the event of an emergency. Reports stating that the

Turkish military conducts surveillance of virtually the entire Turkish population, regarding them as potential enemies of the state, have been personally confirmed by the army chief of staff. For its part, the government has kept quiet in the midst of a public outcry. This demonstrates the continuing threat to democracy and concentration of power which remains in the hands of the army.

On the other hand, recent terror attacks on British institutions and a Free Mason Lodge has made clear that there is potential for the emergence of Islamic extremism feeding on social misery and anti-imperialist sentiments.

The AKP trump card—membership of the EU—is also its Achilles' heel. There is considerable resistance inside the EU itself to Turkish membership. Following its recent losses in regional elections the French governing UMP has issued clear reservations about Turkish membership while the conservative opposition in Germany has been expressing opposition for some time. Should all the concessions made by the AKP—e.g., regarding the issue of Cyprus or the Kurdish question—prove to be in vain, then the future of the party could be quickly under threat.

The main party to profit from opposition to the AKP in the regional elections was the extreme right: the fascist “Grey Wolves” of the MHP (National Movement Party) and the former governing DYP (True Path Party) which, under its new chairman, Mehmet Agar, has shifted into the camp of the extreme right. Both organisations won more than 10 percent of the vote, with the CHP losing votes.

The CHP had prepared the way for such forces by attacking the government from a right-wing nationalist standpoint—a move supported by sections of the trade union bureaucracy and Stalinist groups, as well as a majority of left-wing intellectuals.

A number of leading members and deputies of the CHP have reacted to this latest defeat by vigorously attacking the existing course of the party and commencing a campaign in the press for renewal and liberalisation. A comment in the conservative *Zaman* newspaper of April 6 is typical: “The struggle between (reformist and social liberal) Renewalists and (pro-status quo and statist) Traditionalists has been continuing in the CHP for a long time. The reformist wing favours a synthesis of social democracy and a modern interpretation of Kemalism; want the concepts of secularism and nationalism as well as the economic philosophy of the party to be liberalized. The traditional wing, on the other hand, advocates a return to positions during the era of one-party rule by the CHP.”

The Renewalists are appealing for precisely the sort of liberal social democracy along the lines of Tony Blair’s “New Labour” and Gerhard Schröder’s “New Centre” at a point in time where these parties have been largely

discredited.

While a section of the left supports Turkish nationalism and the army in the name of the struggle against imperialism, another section support Kurdish nationalism. The DEHAP, the only legal Kurdish party, had joined forces with a number of radical and left groups as well as renowned Kemalist intellectuals to form the SHP (Social Democratic Peoples Party)—only to lose at the hands of the AKP in the Kurdish-dominated southeast of Turkey. DEHAP is politically close to the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party), which recently renamed itself Kongra-Gel.

The DEHAP sought to offer its services to both the Kemalist establishment in Turkey and the US. Leading members of the organisation have openly expressed their support for the American occupation of neighbouring Iraq. DEHAP has also spoken out in favour of entry into the European Union together with accepting the financial criteria involved. Such financial measures would have disastrous consequences for the utterly poor and backward farming areas of largely Kurdish southeast Turkey. Nevertheless, despite such political concessions, a number of left-wing groups continued to support the DEHAP.

Now, however, this alliance is threatened because Kurdish nationalists have declared it is responsible for the poor results recorded by DEHAP in the recent elections. The party was able to retain its local mayors in Diyarbakir, Hakkari and Tunceli, but lost its mayors in the Kurdish-dominated provincial capitals of Bingöl, Siirt, Agri and Van to the AKP. Across the country the alliance of SHP/DEHAP recorded just 4.8 percent—much less than had been expected.

A typical commentary was made by Mutlu Civiroglu, formerly responsible for international relations for the predecessor of the DEHAP, HADEP. Prior to the elections Civiroglu wrote on a Kurdish nationalist web site: “Instead of making useless collaborations with powerless Turkish parties to prove “Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood,” DEHAP should seek unity among Kurds and try to reach all Kurds in Turkey.” It can be anticipated that such views will be increasingly heard in the near future.



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