Washington, EU welcome AKP victory in Turkish elections

Stefan Steinberg
25 July 2007

Business, finance and political circles in the United States, the European Union and within Turkey itself reacted positively to the victory of the conservative Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan in national elections held Sunday.

The US embassy was the first to congratulate Erdogan on his victory and in an official statement declared that the US government was looking forward to working with the new Turkish government "on issues of concern to both countries."

This endorsement of the AKP was echoed by the *Wall Street Journal*, which wrote that the result "paves the way for more pro-Western and business-friendly policies ..." Noting that "Turkish public opinion has soured both on the US and the European Union," the *Journal* continued approvingly, "[T]he AKP has been largely friendly to Washington and pledges to forge ahead with Turkey's bid to join the EU."

The president of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barrosso, also congratulated Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan "on his impressive win," and his positive remarks were reinforced by comments by EU Commissioner for Enlargement Olli Rehn.

The enthusiasm on the part of leading international investors and financial markets for the AKP victory was summed up in a comment quoted in the *Independent* newspaper: "The prospect of a single-party AKP government with less than the two-thirds of seats needed to make constitutional changes is ideal, as far as international investors are concerned."

Following a significant rise on the Turkish stock market following the election result, a series of prominent Turkish businessmen added their endorsement of the AKP. The comment by Tugrul Kutadgobilik, chairman of the Turkish Confederation of Employer Associations (MESS), was typical of the generally favourable response by business circles to the AKP victory. "Turkey demands hope, economy, stability and employment ... One-party government and the 14 percent increase in AKP votes imply a serious search for stability," Kutadgobilik declared.

In the national parliamentary elections last Sunday, Turkey's ruling AKP was able to considerably increase its share of the vote. The AKP won 46.6 percent of votes (34 percent in 2002) and now has a total of 340 deputies in the new parliament. The Turkish parliament has a total of 550 members.

Turnout was high for the election at over 80 percent, compared to around 74 percent in the last elections in 2002.

Sunday's result delivered a major rebuff to the main opposition and Turkey's oldest political party, the Republican People's Party (CHP). In the parliamentary elections of 2002, the CHP received 19 percent of the vote (177 deputies). This time round, despite its cooperation with the Democratic Left Party (DSP), the CHP was only able to increase its share of the vote slightly (21 percent). Because of the large number of independent deputies elected, the CHP has a greatly reduced number of seats in the new parliament (111).

The ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), led by Devlet Bahçeli, was able to win support from disenchanted CHP supporters and increased its share of the vote from 8.35 percent in 2002 to 14.3 percent, winning 71 seats. Nevertheless, this is far short of the 20 percent that the party had hoped to win on the basis of its flagrant Turkish chauvinism. The MHP has campaigned on a platform that combines vicious hostility to Turkey's Kurdish minority, support for an invasion of northern Iraq by the Turkish army, and demagogic promises of social improvements.

A major factor in the MHP's ability to increase its vote is the campaign by a number of European bourgeois governments against Turkish membership in the European Union. Accompanied by anti-Muslim campaigns carried out by right-wing forces within their own countries, the leaders of Germany and France, Angela Merkel and Nicholas Sarkozy, have repeatedly spoken out against full EU membership for Turkey The increased vote for the MHP makes clear that the party was able to channel some of the growing opposition to the EU in Turkey into support for its ultra-nationalist perspective.

In addition to the three main parties, 27 independent candidates will take up seats in the new parliament. Twenty four of the 27 independent seats will be filled by representatives of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP). The DTP stood candidates on an independent basis in order to bypass Turkey's restrictive requirements for parties seeking to obtain official representation in parliament. Under Turkish electoral law, parties must obtain at least ten percent of the vote to send deputies to parliament.

Sunday's result represents a political debacle for the CHP which, under its leader Deniz Baykal, has now suffered a series of four election defeats in a row. Rubbing salt in the wound, Erdogan recruited a number of prominent CHP members to stand as AKP candidates.

The CHP even lost ground to the AKP in its political stronghold, the city of Izmir, where the number of CHP deputies dropped from 16 in 2002 to just 11. The AKP, on the other hand, nearly doubled its vote to 30.53 percent, and slightly increased its total of deputies the city. Even the local Chamber of Commerce failed to rally behind the CHP. "The electors gave the AKP another chance," said Izmir Chamber of Commerce Chairman Ekrem Demirtas. "People voted in favor of stability and reconciliation," he added.

Jubilant opponents of the CHP called upon the party's leader to

© World Socialist Web Site

fulfil one of the promises he made in the run-up to the elections. Baykal had declared, “If we are defeated in this general election, I will swim to Rhodes.”

As the traditional party of Turkey’s Kemalist establishment and the organisation with the closest links to the Turkish military, the defeat of the CHP represents a rejection by the Turkish electorate of the attempts by the army to intervene in Turkish politics and destabilise the sitting government earlier this year. In April, the Turkish army high command raised a thinly disguised threat of a putsch should the government proceed with plans to nominate a leading member of the AKP, Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül, as national president.

At the same time, the army commenced massing huge numbers of troops on Turkey’s border with Iraq and repeatedly threatened to cross the border and undertake military action against Kurdish rebels located northern Iraq In parallel with the army campaign, the CHP and MHP organised a series of mass rallies in various Turkish cities to increase the pressure on the AKP government. The decision by Erdogan to call early elections was in direct response to these attempts by the military and the CHP to destabilise his government.

For its part, the Turkish army stepped up its provocations. Just days before the election, the military bombarded positions in northern Iraq, an action that was swiftly condemned by the Iraqi government.

The failure of the CHP to politically capitalise on the provocations carried out by the military reflects the extent of popular opposition both to the machinations of the Turkish high command and the corrupt Kemalist establishment, which still retains a stranglehold on a number of important state institutions and is supported by Turkey’s official trade unions.

While the AKP was able to profit from popular disillusionment with the Kemalist parties and institutions, the party led by Erdogan in no way represents an alternative for the Turkish working class. It is a bourgeois party committed to “free market” capitalist policies and closely aligned with Washington.

The AKP was founded in August 2001 through the amalgamation of a core of conservative members of the formerly banned Welfare Party with representatives of the up-and-coming Anatolian bourgeoisie and upper-middle class.

Under conditions of financial crisis and rampant inflation, the AKP was able to win a parliamentary majority in national elections one year after its foundation. Having conducted a campaign against the demands of the major banks and big capital in 2002, the AKP in practice has proved to be a loyal defender of the profit system.

Since taking power, the AKP has often been praised for its pro-business “realism.” A key policy in this respect was the introduction of the “Foreign Direct Investment Law” (FDI), which massively increased the attractiveness of Turkey as a cheap-labour platform for international business. In 2001, total foreign investment totalled just $1.1 billion. In 2006, it hit $20 billion, and is expected to total $27 billion this year.

Speaking at an Istanbul conference in early April organised by Tuskon, Turkey’s largest business organisation, Economics Minister Ali Babacan declared, “The message of FDI is that I have confidence in the future of this country.” Since the AKP assumed power there has been a five-fold rise in share values on the Turkish stock market.

Encouraged by the AKP’s aggressive program of privatisation, major international banks such as Citigroup, BNP Paribas SA, Fortis, Rabobank and others have bought large stakes in Turkish banks. Now, major telecommunication companies are seeking to capitalise on Turkey’s plans to join the EU, and international interest in Turkey’s real estate sector is also growing. Increasingly, Asian companies are also expressing an eagerness to reap the benefits of the high profits to be gained in Turkey.

While Turkey has experienced a period of economic growth for a number of years, the distribution of the benefits has been very uneven. Poor peasants repeatedly took to the streets to protest against the consequences of AKP policies during the party’s first term in office.

While sections of the Turkish middle class and the Anatolian bourgeoisie in particular have seen a considerable rise in their incomes and profits, unemployment, especially in rural areas, remains high, while broad layers of the urban poor have seen no real improvement in their lives. In his comments immediately after the election, Erdogan made clear that the policy of the AKP to open up Turkey to international finance would continue. This can only serve to intensify the growing social divisions in Turkish society.

The AKP leadership has continually sought to adapt itself to the CHP and the military. At the height of the conflict with the army and its CHP allies, Erdogan accused the secularist establishment of firing a “bullet at democracy.” In the course of the election campaign, however, Erdogan adopted a much more conciliatory tone.

Following the shelling of northern Iraq last Wednesday, Erdogan announced plans for a trilateral meeting comprising Turkish, American and Iraqi military and civilian officials to discuss a strategy against the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Pro-US Kurdish elements in Iraq are evidently pinning their hopes on a deal with the Turkish prime minister to isolate Kurdish rebels in the north of Iraq and prevent a full-scale invasion by the Turkish army.

The conflict between the AKP and the Kemalist establishment and military is expected to resurface shortly in connection with a new election for Turkish president, who is chosen by the parliament. Erdogan had promised to organise a new ballot within four weeks of Sunday’s election.

The Turkish military, which has already threatened the government with a putsch, will not simply stand aside should the AKP attempt to find a solution to the issue of the presidency with the help of Kurdish deputies.

While many Western commentators have welcomed the AKP victory as a sign of future political stability in Turkey, this is a superficial view. In large part due to its geo-strategic location, Turkey represents a vital link between Asia and Europe in a region that has been plunged into turmoil by the US war in Iraq.

The potential for conflict arising from such foreign policy issues as Turkey’s future orientation are compounded by the high levels of social equality inside the country—a social polarization that has been exacerbated by the policies of the AKP. Under conditions where the Turkish working class lacks any independent political representation, it has been possible for the right-wing, pro-business AKP to profit from the elections, but fresh conflicts between the government and the Turkish masses are inevitable.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site