Turkey: Municipal elections reveal deep socio-political divisions

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The Turkish ruling Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) won most municipal elections held on Sunday, but lost several key cities and registered a reduced vote compared to its landslide victory in the national elections held almost two years ago in July 2007.

Although the AKP managed to win most of the mayoral and district administrator posts available, it garnered just 38.9 percent of the vote, down from the 46.6 percent it scored in the national elections in 2007.

In an interview last week, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the prime minister and the leader of the AKP, said he would consider it a "failure" if his party wins less in the city council vote than it won in the 2007 national elections. According to Erdogan's own criteria, his party's result last Sunday of minus 7.7 percentage points represents just such a failure.

The AKP won the elections in most of the major cities including Istanbul, Ankara, Kocaeli, Bursa, Denizli, Sakarya, Samsun, Trabzon, Rize, Kayseri, Gaziantep and Konya. AKP candidates managed to win the elections in the industrial cities of Anatolia, such as Kayseri, Denizli and Bursa, which are centres for the so-called "Anatolian tigers," known for their Islamist sympathies. Nonetheless, support for the AKP decreased significantly in these cities due to the ongoing and deepening economic crisis.

Maintaining these cities under AKP control was very important for the Islamist wing of the Turkish bourgeoisie. Such municipalities have relatively large budgets and have played an important role in channelling resources into the coffers of the AKP since 1994.

The AKP has come in first at the polls since 2002 and increased its votes in the last three consecutive elections. On Sunday, this trend was checked. Speaking at a midnight press conference held at his party's headquarters, Erdogan declared: "I am not satisfied with local elections results so far. The current picture has not pleased me."

When asked by a journalist, the prime minister also implied that a cabinet shuffle is in the cards. "Changes in the cabinet were made in the past. We will continue to make changes in the cabinet in the future," he said.

The attitude of the press

The Dogan Media Group newspapers, as well as *Vatan* and the staunch "left-liberal"-Kemalist *Cumhuriyet*, agreed that the election results constitute a warning to the AKP. Their headlines on Monday read: "Ballot Box Warning" (*Hurriyet*); "Voters' Warning to AKP" (*Vatan*); "People Say ‘One Minute'" (*Radikal*); "Warning Message Emerges from Ballot Box" (*Cumhuriyet*).

Islamist and pro-AKP newspapers highlighted the fact that the ruling party emerged as the winner of the elections and declared that the results indicated widespread confidence in the AKP. They also sought to portray the economic crisis as an external and uncontrollable factor working against the innocent AKP government. Their headlines were as follows: "People Vote for Stability" (*Turkiye*); "Confidence Vote despite Crisis" (*Yeni Safak*); "Crisis Effect" (*Sabah*); "Different Messages to All Parties" (*Zaman*).

These diametrically opposed comments are a reflection of the deep socio-political divisions within the society and the ongoing protracted political crisis gripping the country.

Four opposition parties gained ground

In second and third place behind the AKP was the Kemalist-nationalist CHP (Republican Peoples Party) with 23.1 percent and the fascist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) with 16.1 percent. Both parties managed to increase their votes as well as the number of mayoral seats compared to the previous municipal elections. In spite of this increase, both parties are almost non-existent in many parts of the

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country, particularly in Kurdish cities.

The CHP's votes increased in mainly the coastal cities and in the region of Thrace. It appears that members of the Alawi minority once again gave their support to the CHP, disappointed by the futile appeasement policy of the government last year. The CHP was able to increase its share of the vote considerably in those cities and provinces with a more secularist tradition and a middle class layer keen to protect its Western lifestyle

The MHP increased its votes in many Anatolian cities, expanding its electoral base especially in cities where the fascist movement has been historically strong. Needless to say, this is a very alarming development for the working class as well as the oppressed Kurds and other minorities.

The Kurdish nationalist DTP (Democratic Society Party) managed to consolidate its dominance in the Kurdish southeastern provinces. The DTP's candidate in Diyarbakir, Osman Baydemir, won the elections with a comfortable 65 percent majority.

In the wake of the 2007 elections, the AKP leadership adopted nationalist rhetoric in relation to the Kurdish question and aligned itself with the Turkish military. Shortly afterwards, the government gave the army a green light to cross the border and conduct military action in Iraq. This was not just a simple policy mistake—as many liberals and left-liberals maintain—but an inevitable outcome of the class character of the AKP.

On the other hand, the DTP was not able to reach its target of increasing its support from Kurdish people living in the big cities located in the western part of the country.

It is no exaggeration to say that in Kurdish cities a *de facto* two-party system has been established under the domination of the DTP with only the AKP as a rival party in the region.

The other and more "orthodox" Islamist party SP (Felicity Party), from which the AKP leadership originated, succeeded in almost tripling its support to 5.2 percent. It appears that a substantial layer of disillusioned hardcore Islamists decided to shift their support to the SP, and in the next national elections the SP could emerge as a serious rival to the AKP.

The once mighty and now defunct so-called "centre-right parties," the ANAP (Motherland Party) and the DP (Democratic Party), almost totally disappeared from the political scene scoring 0.7 percent and 3.7 percent, respectively. Under these conditions, an attempt to establish a new "centre-right" party that would try to pull away some opportunistic elements from the AKP would not come as a surprise.

Political and economic crisis set to deepen

The results of the March 29 municipal elections reveal that the political map of the country is characterised by sharp and explosive internal socio-political divisions, which have been compounded by a very deep economic crisis that started in the fourth quarter of last year and has already assumed depression-like dimensions.

This is why some prominent columnists assessing the results of the polls talk about the grave dangers posed by such "polarisation." However, these bourgeois pundits have no realistic solution to offer—other than calling for moderation by all sides.

Within the context of the global economic and financial crisis, the protracted political crisis of Turkey will undoubtedly worsen in the coming months and years.

In the months preceding the municipal elections, the AKP expended the country's meagre resources quite arbitrarily to secure its political fortunes. The government resorted to an arrogant and illegitimate campaign of vote buying. On the eve of the elections, subsidised coal was handed out to the urban poor, and even free fold-up beds, refrigerators and washing machines were distributed in rural areas. All of these election abuses were committed quite publicly and with impunity.

Due to an increase in government spending and a decline in tax revenues, the budget deficit rose to 7.4 billion TL (US$4.35 billion) in February 2009, a massive 824 percent jump compared to the same month of 2008. Turkish capitalism is deeply in debt, and the foreign exchange reserves of the Central Bank are relatively weak.

Such a deficit is not sustainable and can only bring about a reduction in the creditworthiness of the country and further capital flight with disastrous consequences for the economy and the working population, in particular. To avert such a possibility, the AKP government will probably sign a new stand-by agreement with the IMF containing painful austerity measures. Such a deal will mean further major attacks on the working class and other layers of the working population and the oppressed.

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